ARGUING THEIR WORLD:
THE REPRESENTATION OF MAJOR SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ISSUES IN
EDNA FERBER’S AND FANNIE HURST’S FICTION, 1910-1935

A dissertation presented

By

Kathryn Ruth Bloom

to
The Department of English

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

In the field of
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Northeastern University
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Between the early decades of the twentieth-century and mid-century, Edna Ferber and Fannie Hurst were popular and prolific authors of fiction about American society and culture. Almost a century ago, they were writing about race, immigration, economic disparity, drug addiction, and other issues our society is dealing with today with a renewed sense of urgency. In spite of their extraordinary popularity, by the time they died within a few months of each other in 1968, their reputations had fallen into eclipse. This dissertation focuses on Ferber’s and Hurst’s fiction published between approximately 1910 and 1935, the years in which both authors enjoyed the highest critical and popular esteem. Perhaps because these realistic narratives generally do not engage in the stylistic experimentation of the literary world around them, literary scholars came to undervalue their work. My close readings and consideration of secondary socio-political sources establish the importance of this body of fiction as a reflection of and influence on social issues of their day, with contemporary reverberations. The social and cultural issues with which the authors are concerned include cultural diversity in Ferber’s *Cimarron* (1929), her representation of the increasing homogenization of American culture in *Show Boat* (1926), and the association of her intensely visual writing style with the historical mural cycles of Thomas Hart Benton in her early regional novels. Hurst’s equally wide-ranging concerns include representation of the rise-and-fall of German-American culture; food insecurity, weight, and non-standard body type in narratives about cultural assimilation and acceptance of diversity; the impact of the 1920s opioid epidemic on upper-middle-class families, and her modernist experiment in *Lummox* (1923), in which she combines a
realistic social-justice narrative calling for the equitable treatment of domestic workers with a modernist narrative that describes an inarticulate woman’s search for self-expression through music. Through this work of recovery and restoration, I strive to demonstrate that through the characters who populate their fiction and the personal and societal issues they confront, Edna Ferber and Fannie Hurst are still speaking to us—and that there is much to learn from them.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Several years ago, I undertook an apartment renovation that required transferring many of my most-valued possessions to a storage unit. Anxious about losing precious items, particularly the literature I love, I selected the books I considered essential and kept them instead in a bedroom closet. Most had been part of my family’s library since I was a child. They included Betty Smith’s A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, William Saroyan’s The Human Comedy and My Name Is Aram, Kathryn Forbes’s Mama’s Bank Account, and the collected short stories of Stephen Vincent Benet. When I applied to the PhD program in English at Northeastern some years later, reconsidering my selections made me realize that my particular literary interest focuses on middlebrow literature, a genre that was scorned during the years of my own undergraduate and earlier graduate education. To my surprise and delight, I soon learned that the study of middlebrow literature has gained legitimacy in the academy and am proud to add my work of Edna Ferber and Fannie Hurst to scholarship in this emerging field.

Writing a dissertation is the final step in the pursuit of a PhD and, although much of the student’s time is spent researching and writing in isolation, it cannot be achieved without the input and support of many people. I owe special thanks to members of the English department at Northeastern for welcoming a non-traditional student into their program and making her feel at home. My thanks go in particular to the members of my dissertation committee, Professors Lori Lefkovitz (chair), Ryan Cordell, and Kathleen Kelly. In addition, Professor Laura Green has been most supportive of my efforts. I am also grateful for the assistance of Melissa Daigle, Jonathan Fitzgerald, Samantha Przybylowicz, and Amanda Rust. I also express my appreciation to my cousin David S.
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My greatest thanks go to my parents, Morris and Frances S. Bloom, of blessed memory, to whom this work is dedicated. They filled our house with music and literature and always encouraged my intellectual interests. In spite of the limited opportunities for higher education available to them, their curiosity, openness to learning, and enthusiasm for inquiry and discussion continue to enrich my life.
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PUBLICATION CHRONOLOGY

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Fannie Hurst


“The Other Cheek.” First Published: Saturday Evening Post, April 11, 1914.

“T.B.” First Published: Saturday Evening Post, January 9, 1915.

“Sob Sister.” First Published: Metropolitan Magazine, February 1916.

“Sieve of Fulfillment.” First Published: Cosmopolitan, October 1917.

“A Boob Spelled Backward.” First Published: Cosmopolitan, April 1918.

“She Also Serves.” First Published: Cosmopolitan, October 1918.

“Humoresque.” First Published: Cosmopolitan, March 1919.

“Even as You and I.” 1919.

“Roulette.” First Published: Cosmopolitan, May 1921.

“She Walks in Beauty.” First Published: Cosmopolitan, August 1921.

Lummox, 1923.

“The Spangle That Could Be a Tear.” First Published: The Bookman, December 1923.

“The Gold in Fish.” First Published: Cosmopolitan, August 1925.

Back Street. 1931.

Imitation of Life. 1933.

No Food with My Meals. 1935.

Edna Ferber

“One Hundred Percent.” *Metropolitan Magazine*, October 1918.

*So Big.* 1924.

*Show Boat.* 1926.


*Cimarron.* 1929.

*Come and Get It.* 1935.

*A Peculiar Treasure.* 1939.

INTRODUCTION

In 1989, the author and social commentator Tom Wolfe published an essay lamenting the decline of realistic fiction and the growing popularity of literary texts grounded in “fashionable European ideas” and characterized by a “late-Marxist twist.” Dismissing the post-modern novelist John Hawkes’s claim that he [Hawkes] “began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting, and theme,” Wolfe argues instead in favor of the “realistic mode,” which “provided a slice of life, a cross section that provided a true and powerful picture of individuals and society.” In Wolfe’s view, the intellectual and emotional distance between realism and post-modernism underscores a lack of communication between different levels of society; the truth, he asserts, is that “the intelligentsia have always had contempt for the realistic novel—a form that wallows so enthusiastically in the dirt of everyday life and the dirty secrets of class envy and that, still worse, is so easily understood and obviously relished by the mob, i.e., the middle class” (“Billion-Footed Beast”).

Wolfe’s “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast” was published almost 30 years ago and time has changed the nature of some of his concerns. His intensely urban orientation ignores the importance of American regionalism, a realistic genre out of favor during the 1980s, but currently enjoying renewed critical attention in part because, as Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse write, "regionalist texts offer a place from which twenty-first century readers can think about the consequences of creating regions for either cultural or economic exploitation" (Writing Out of Place 30). In addition, Wolfe’s contention that reporting is “the most valuable and least understood resource available
to any writer” does not distinguish between so-called “objective” reporting and the freedom of fiction writers to use facts selectively to make a larger point. Nevertheless, much of Wolfe’s discussion still rings true and if either Edna Ferber or Fannie Hurst were still alive, they would no doubt enthusiastically support his claim that “realism…created the ‘absorbing’ or ‘gripping’ quality that is peculiar to the novel, the quality that makes the reader feel that he has been pulled not only into the setting of the story, but also into the minds and central nervous systems of the characters” (“Billion-Footed Beast”).

Between the early decades of the twentieth century and mid-century, Ferber and Hurst were popular authors of the kind of narratives about American society and culture that Wolfe favors. Although they were different kinds of women and different kinds of writers, their lives and reputations often overlapped and time has elided many of the differences between them. Both were born about 1885 into Jewish families living in the American Midwest and died within a few months of each other in 1968. By the time they died, critical approbation had moved from their realistic literary styles to experimental modernist and post-modernist techniques and their reputations had fallen into eclipse. I seek to demonstrate that although neither Ferber nor Hurst is a literary modernist—let alone a post-modernist—both are deeply concerned about the impact of modernity on the lives of men and women much like their own middle-class, middlebrow readers and use those very techniques of realistic fiction that John Hawkes so disdains—plot, character, setting, and theme—to describe how such people adapt to a rapidly changing world. Throughout their work, they mine a deep vein of social and cultural issues, material that, as Wolfe writes, “was rich beyond belief and getting richer every day”
(“Billion-Footed Beast”). Almost a century ago, Ferber and Hurst were writing about race, immigration, economic disparity, drug addiction, and other issues our society is dealing with a renewed sense of urgency today. As a result, the novels and short stories that Ferber and Hurst published many years ago have a surprising contemporary resonance and the present-day reader can turn to them to gain insight into not only how America became the type of society it is today, but also how today’s social problems were conceptualized a century ago.

Most current scholarship on Ferber and Hurst focuses on issues of race and gender, which is not surprising in our era of identity scholarship. I draw on these analyses and also seek to broaden the scope of discussion by demonstrating the different ways the authors argue their world and in doing so, enter the national conversation about significant social and cultural issues. Viewed in this way, Ferber and Hurst emerge as thoughtful commentators who are concerned with, inter alia, race relations and racial passing (e.g., Ferber’s 1926 Show Boat and Hurst’s 1933 Imitation of Life); attitudes about immigration and cultural assimilation (e.g., Ferber’s 1929 Cimarron and Hurst’s 1931 Back Street); the conflict between the old-world values of immigrant parents and those of their children struggling to adjust to the American way of life (e.g., Hurst’s “The Gold in Fish,” 1925); opioid addiction (e.g. Hurst’s “She Walks in Beauty,” 1921), and issues of culture and the arts, such as Ferber’s satire of the Manhattan theater world of the 1920s in Show Boat, Hurst’s combination of a modernist aesthetic theme with a realistic call for social justice in Lummox (1923), and the connection between Thomas Hart Benton’s historical murals and Ferber’s regional novels.
My focus is on Ferber and Hurst’s fiction published between approximately 1910 and 1935, the years in which both authors enjoyed the highest critical and popular esteem. The stories I analyze take place between the 1880s and the 1920s, the era in which literary realism was at the height of its popularity. In each chapter, I consider how the authors deal with different aspects of two overarching questions: how the United States can best create a coherent national body out of its diverse population and what constitutes a true “American” culture. I contextualize each issue within its era and then provide a close reading of representative texts to illustrate the ways in which Ferber and Hurst present them to their readers. In Chapter 1, “‘America and I’: Edna Ferber’s *Cimarron* and American Attitudes toward Assimilation and Pluralism,” I discuss the way Ferber uses her novel of western expansion to enter into the national discussion about immigration, assimilation, and cultural pluralism. I demonstrate how the character of Isaiah, a black youth who longs to join in the adventure of American’s westward expansion, illustrates W.E.B. DuBois’s early twentieth-century theory of African American “double-consciousness” and anticipates what Homi Bhabha, writing in the 1990s, calls “colonial mimicry,” through which “the reforming, civilizing mission [of the white man] is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double” (*Location of Culture* 85). In addition, I suggest that the character of Sol Levy, an immigrant peddler, reflects the continued outsider status of Jews in the United States. I also demonstrate how Ferber uses her characters to demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of other early twentieth-century theories of assimilation, including the ideal of the nation as a melting pot, Horace Kallen’s idea of a “symphony of civilizations” in which each “instrument” plays its own part, and Randolph Bourne’s theory of transnationalism, a
kind of multiculturalism in which new Americans express loyalty both to both their
country of origin and the United States.

Another issue relating to the integration of new immigrants into American society
involves how best to balance love for the ethnic motherland with feelings of patriotism
for their new country. For example, German-American culture was once so prominent
that parts of the midwest were known as the “sauerkraut belt.” Although Americans of
German descent still comprise one of the nation’s largest ethnic groups, their unique
ethnic culture virtually disappeared during the early decades of the twentieth century, in
large part as a result of nativist attitudes that emerged in connection with World War I.
In Chapter 2, “‘Germany, My Mother, America, My Bride’: Fannie Hurst and the
Representation of German-American Culture,” I explore how several of Hurst’s
narratives can be taken together to illustrate why and how this vibrant culture
disappeared. I begin with Hurst’s description of the midwestern German-American
culture of the 1880s in Back Street and contrast this representation with the war-era “A
Boob Spelled Backward” (1918), in which the author describes the conflicted emotions
of German Americans whose soldier-sons are called upon both to put themselves in
harm’s way and, at the same time, possibly injure or kill relatives fighting for the enemy
army in Europe. Hurst’s greatest challenge in this short story is to communicate the
ambivalent feelings of German Americans without violating wartime censorship codes
that prohibited any sign of sympathy for the enemy. After the Armistice, Hurst becomes
more open in her critique and uses an episode in Lummox to present an impassioned
attack against “the eager, hating girls” whose home-front fervor contributed to the
destruction of German culture in the United States.
People trying to assimilate fully into mainstream society sometimes go to great lengths to conform to normative standards of beauty. In Chapter 3, “Food on Her Mind, Just Not with Her Meals: Women, Food, and Body Image in Fannie Hurst’s Early Fiction,” I discuss how Hurst uses these tropes to illustrate the ways in which some people tried to assimilate and how others resisted such conformity. Some of these narratives describe the inter-generational conflict between foreign-born parents and their Americanized children. In others, Hurst uses images of food and body image to illustrate the challenges faced by native-born Americans struggling to survive, such as the food insecurity of the working poor and prejudice against men and women of non-standard body types. This chapter includes a discussion of Hurst’s best-remembered work, *Imitation of Life*, which includes a discussion of race in America that Hurst presents in part through the story of a light-skinned young black woman who rejects her racial body and passes as white.

If we were to have read Hurst’s 1921 short story “She Walks in Beauty” even a short decade ago, we might have considered it from an era entirely different from our town; read today, it seems torn from current headlines. In Chapter 4, “‘So Happy for a Time’: Fannie Hurst and the 1920s Opioid Epidemic,” I discuss how the author incorporates several different literary styles into a narrative about an upper-middle-class woman who is addicted to morphine as well as commentary on addiction treatment that has continued relevance in our own time.

Throughout their careers, Ferber and Hurst were outspoken advocates for liberal causes and it is not surprising to find these attitudes reflected in their narratives. Because they are considered (and sometimes dismissed) as popular writers, it is
perhaps more surprising to recognize the frequency with which they consider the changing aesthetic and cultural values of their era and contribute to the ongoing conversation about what constitutes a unique American culture. Ferber’s *Show Boat* is an example of a text that considers both social and aesthetic issues. Although it is remembered today primarily because of its sub-plot about racial prejudice as well as the musical adaptation by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II, I argue in Chapter 5, “Life Upon the Wicked Stage’: Art and Authenticity in Edna Ferber’s *Show Boat,*” that the novel reflects the author’s prescient concerns about the increasing homogenization of American culture. I demonstrate that almost two-thirds of the novel is based on a structure that situates the roots of American artistic expression within a mythic frame and that Ferber abandons this approach in the novel’s final chapters, in which she turns to a satiric commentary about the American theatre’s growing dependence on what she considers vitiated European sources.

In Chapter 6, “The Many Long-Dumb Voices’: The Social and Aesthetic Loss of Voice in Fannie Hurst’s *Lummox,*” I demonstrate how Hurst incorporates into a single text both a realistic social-justice narrative calling for the equitable treatment of domestic workers and a modernist narrative that describes an inarticulate woman’s search for self-expression through music. In Chapter 7, “A Picture Held Us Captive’: The Influence of the American Regionalist Movement on Edna Ferber’s Early Novels,” I compare Ferber’s regional narratives of the 1920s and 1930s to the historical mural cycles of Thomas Hart Benton to demonstrate how both the author and the artist bring their audiences into their historical narratives by means of an intensely visual observational style. This is another example of an aesthetic issue that is generating
renewed public awareness in the early twenty-first century; although the genre of American regionalism fell out of favor during the mid-to-late twentieth century, it has begun to assume greater contemporary importance as the result of renewed tensions between local and regional concerns on the one hand and an increasing emphasis on global economic and cultural cosmopolitanism on the other.

In light of Ferber’s and Hurst’s popularity throughout their long careers, as well as the present-day restoration of other twentieth-century women writers to the American literary canon, it is surprising that so little critical attention has been paid to these authors. In What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel, 1920-1960, Gordon Hutner includes them in lists of popular American middlebrow authors of the era but devotes no individual attention to their work. Critics of an earlier generation did appreciate their popularity but assigned mixed grades for style. For example, in a publication review of Show Boat in The Bookman, Grant Overton writes that Ferber “now stands forth as the keenest social critic among our fiction writers” (142). In Our Short Story Writers (1922), Blanche Colton Williams praises Ferber’s characterizations and describes Hurst’s short stories as “the best artistry to be found in present-day conte writing. Each develops in a series of perfectly selected scenes, vivid, picturesque, staged with accessories of time and place, which to the minutest detail, reflect the operations of life” (153), but also comments that “she has never been strong on plot” (152). Writing in 1936, Margaret Lawrence places both authors’ characters in the category of “Go-Getters” (as opposed to “Little Girl Pals,” “Matriarchs,” “Helpmeets,” “Sophisticated Ladies,” “Priestesses” and “Artistes”). She says that Ferber “writes as if none of the authors of Europe existed. From the classical standpoint she has no style
whatever. But from the vital standpoint of how style is associated with the emotion of time and place, she has perfect style” (191). Lawrence is not as kind to Hurst, describing her as a “graduated sob-sister concerning women” and comparing her to a bare-knuckle fighter: “She knocks at her story and slams it down and rolls it through with the intensity of a prize-fighter” (193).

Stephanie Lewis Thompson reminds us that, early in her career “critics recognized Fannie Hurst as a potentially high-brow artist” (158), but that she received mixed reviews for literary style even at the height of her popularity. In her 1999 biography Fannie: The Talent for Success of Author Fannie Hurst, Brooke Kroeger quotes the Boston Transcript critic Edwin J. O’Brien, who enthusiastically writes: “I must affirm once more the genuine literary art of Fannie Hurst. The absolute fidelity of her dialogue to life and its revealing spirit, not despite, but rather because of the vulgarities she accepts, seems to me to assure her permanence in her best work” (qtd. Kroeger 37). O’Brien thought so highly of Hurst’s work that he awarded “honored mention” in The Best Short Stories of 1915 to half the short stories she published that year (Kroeger 37). And in a review of Lummox in the New York World, Haywood Broun praises Hurst’s ability “to make an emotion rise and stalk before the reader” and finds her mastery of dialogue “often quite magical.” However, he cautions, “[s]omeone ought to speak to her severely about adverbs. Far too many things in Lummox happen goldily” (qtd. Kroeger 92).

As already noted, such work as has been done on Ferber and Hurst since the 1990s has placed emphasized their portrayals of gender and race. Most of this criticism focuses on Ferber, with several critics, notably Donna Campbell, Heidi Kenaga, Eliza
McGraw, and Amanda Zinck, paying particular attention to *Cimarron*. Their insights are referenced in the specific chapters to which they apply. Hurst has received less critical attention to date, but two general observations about her work can be extended to Ferber as well and underscore the ways in which their texts comment on American culture and society. In *Imitations of Life: Fannie Hurst’s Gaslight Sonatas*, Abe Ravitz writes that Hurst “would frequently emphasize the girl that is hungry,” but with some exceptions (such as Bertha, the protagonist of *Lummox*), she more often writes about the working girl who understands too well that she may be able to afford dinner today but is only one meal away from hunger (36). On the surface, some of Ferber’s heroines appear to enjoy more upscale lifestyles, but they are usually either widowed or divorced mothers or the wives of charming but unreliable men and are thus as alone in the world—and as close to the financial edge—as Hurst’s women. Readers might pity the desperately-poor and often-hungry Bertha in *Lummox*, but they would not find many parallels between her life and their own. On the other hand, they might well understand Bea Pullman’s anxiety in *Imitation of Life* and Magnolia Hawks Ravenal’s in *Show Boat* when, respectively widowed and abandoned, they are left to raise their young daughters without any emotional or financial support to fall back on. This sense of identification with the characters lends emotional strength to Ferber and Hurst’s narratives; readers cannot look down on or condescend to their characters—and they cannot look away from the parallels to their own lives.

Susan Koppelman’s observation that “[i]n Fannie Hurst’s peak years, her writing and the historical moment were perfectly matched” (*Stories*, “Introduction” xvii) can be extended to the work of Ferber as well and echoes Lawrence’s comment, quoted
above, that “from the vital standpoint of how style is associated with the emotion of time and place, she [Ferber] has perfect style” (191). Ferber and Hurst were both born into America’s “Gilded Age,” the sobriquet for the era between the 1870s and the early 1900s. These were the years in which the United States began to emerge as an industrial and economic powerhouse. The nation’s new-found influence and affluence created greater opportunity and an enhanced quality of life for many Americans, but it also resulted in exaggerated expressions of corporate greed and individual materialism. In addition, many affluent Americans were reluctant to deal with the growing number of social problems that these excesses generated, such as the consequences of increasing income inequality. In 1906, the philosopher William James warned about America’s “moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS [sic]. That—with the squalid cash interpretation put on the word ‘success’—is our national disease” (“Letter to H.G. Wells,” 1 September 1906).

Ferber and Hurst are not, of course, unique in commenting on the condition of America. Questions such as how the United States can best incorporate its diverse population into a cohesive national body and what constitutes the—or a—“true” American culture have been argued throughout the American experience; if the questions themselves have remained the same over time, the suggested answers have changed. In an effort to provide broad perspective on the many issues Ferber and Hurst wrote about, my discussion includes not only commentary by literary critics, but also refers to the work of philosophers, sociologists, and other thought leaders who have analyzed these problems. Here, I want to identify several overarching themes that provide the framework for my analysis and provide representative examples of the roles
they play in Ferber’s and Hurst’s fiction. These include the changing concept of what makes up a “society” and its “culture”; the nature of the Progressive movement that helped to define the America in which Ferber and Hurst grew up; the impact of the economic environment within which they lived and wrote, and the influence of their Jewish backgrounds on their writing.

Raymond Williams was one of the leading twentieth-century theorists of “society” and “culture.” As he writes:

Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings…The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact and discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind. (“Culture Is Ordinary” 11)

Williams makes an important distinction between the two meanings of “culture”: “We use the word culture in…two senses: to mean a whole way of life—the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning—the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction” (“Culture Is Ordinary” 11). In keeping with Williams’s emphasis on the dual meaning of the word, I use “culture” in both senses, both as the environment within which Ferber’s and Hurst’s discussions of social issues take place and also in terms of the way in which they depict the processes of creative expression.
We can find echoes of Williams in Wolfe’s statement that “[o]ne of the specialties of the realistic novel…was the demonstration of the influence of society on even the most personal aspects of the life of the individual” (“Billion-Footed Beast”). And Wolfe would likely agree—as do I—with Williams’s statement that realism, “while faithful to the contemporary reality which is its subject, is concerned above all to discern the underlying movements in it” (“Crisis in English Studies” 255). Wolfe and Williams reject the attitudes of those proponents of high art who look down on middlebrow writers and search instead for an audience that Wolfe somewhat cynically describes as one consisting of “the inevitably small minority of truly cultivated people as opposed to the mob, who wished only to be entertained or to be assured they were ‘cultured’” (“Billion-Footed Beast”). Williams sums up his own position against elitism by asserting “[c]ulture is ordinary: that is the first fact” (“Culture Is Ordinary” 11): “What kind of life can it be, I wonder, to produce …this extraordinary decision to call certain things culture and then separate them, as with a park wall, from ordinary people and ordinary work” (“Culture Is Ordinary” 12).

For Williams and Wolfe, “the mob” consists of the vast majority of ordinary people who make up a given culture. Where they differ is in the definition of exactly who is part of the mob, a distinction that reflects the difference between their generations and social backgrounds. Although a Cambridge graduate, Williams was born in 1921 into a working-class family in Wales. He understands the tendency to lump the great mass of people together so that the “[m]asses became a new word for mob: the others, the unknown, the unwashed, the crowd beyond one” (“Individuals and Societies” 18). He considers this a misrepresentation because, in actuality, “the masses are always the
others, whom we don’t know, and can’t know. Yet now, in our kind of society, we see these others regularly in their myriad variations; stand, physically, beside them. They are here, and we are here with them. And that we are with them is of course the whole point. To other people, we also are masses. Masses are other people” (Culture and Society 299-300). Williams suggests that a culture is itself a form of resistance because “[t]he development of the idea of culture has, throughout, been a criticism of what has been called the bourgeois idea of society” (Culture and Society 328).

Wolfe, on the other hand, was born in 1931; with his prep-school education and Yale PhD, he is a patrician by any definition. He agrees with Williams on the importance of treating “the masses” with respect, but suggests that by the late 1980s, it is the bourgeois, in the form of America’s socially-ambitious middle class, that has become “the mob.”

Williams and Wolfe spurn the intellectual elites; Nancy Bentley, on the other hand, focuses on the anxiety the “intellectuals and the educated classes” experienced in reaction to the emerging mass culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which she describes as “a crisis not unlike our current uncertainty about digital culture” (Rorotoko, “Interview”). In Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture, 1870-1920, she situates the origin of the contemporary idea of “culture” in Matthew Arnold’s 1869 Culture and Anarchy (68) and stresses that:

Surely part of what ‘vivified’ culture in the educated vernacular was Arnold’s pairing of the word with ‘anarchy’ as its defining antonym. The red-flag urgency of ‘anarchy’ made ‘culture’ its cool and tranquil opposite, an antidote against social and political turmoil…Culture was conceived as a neutral or ‘distinterested’
sphere of human experience, a sphere in which the warring interests of factions could recede in favor of a shared light for intelligent reflection on modern life. (68)

Bentley includes tabloid newspapers, film, and amusement parks in her discussion of the effect of mass entertainment on literary culture—and, by extension, on American culture in general. She acknowledges the importance of commercial success to the producers of popular entertainment: “In its fealty to the profit motive, mass culture opened an expressive space freed not just from the tastes of aristocrats and wealthy patrons but also from the judgment of informed critics still attached to evaluating culture through established criteria of beauty” (3). She stresses, however, that contempt for the profit motive is not the only reason the intellectual elites resisted new forms of mass culture. They also resented their own loss of moral and intellectual authority in shaping America’s values. Thus, she writes, to authors such as W.D. Howells, “mass culture seemed a nemesis, a rival for the work of shaping the sensibilities of a national public” (12). Nevertheless, Bentley warns, “to see high culture in this period as a program of class domination is to miss the most important aspects of its social power. Advocates of high art recognized that cultural forms invite a transformation of some of the deepest, most vital human responses” (73).

Not all members of the cultural elite resisted these changes. Van Wyck Brooks, for one, accepted the reality that “we have in America two publics, the cultivated public and the business public, the public of theory and the public of action” (America’s Coming of Age 111). He describes these two publics as “running side by side but rarely intermingling,” tracing their origins to separate streams of Puritan thought: the “transcendental view” of Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson and the
“catchpenny opportunism” that extends from Benjamin Franklin through the nineteenth-century humorists and into “contemporary business life” (9). Unlike Howells, Brooks is hopeful about the possibility of developing “a middle tradition, a tradition which effectively combines theory and action, a tradition which is just as fundamentally American as either flag-waving or money-grabbing” (111). Nevertheless, advocates of high culture continued to defend what George Santayana calls the “Genteel Tradition” and what they considered the moral responsibility of the intellectual elites to bring high culture to the masses.

In focusing on high culture, Williams, Wolfe, and Bentley acknowledge, but do not pursue, the importance of the cultural changes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the great mass of Americans who made up the working, lower-middle, and middle classes. That is Ferber and Hurst’s project. Given their popularity, it is inconceivable that Bentley, Williams, and Wolfe would not have been familiar, either directly or indirectly, with Ferber’s and Hurst’s work, even though they do not refer to them in their writings. Bentley’s literary mandarins want to instruct the masses in how to behave in polite society by serving as literary and moral exemplars, but her description of the distance between the advocates of high culture and the producers of mass culture as one of “[h]ostility and friction” (7) does not allow room for Ferber’s and Hurst’s attempts to navigate the space between high art and mass culture. Wolfe is enthusiastic about the genre of realism within which Ferber and Hurst write, but does not seem to recognize that many of the American authors he praises—including Sinclair Lewis, Pearl Buck, John Steinbeck, James Jones, and Irwin Shaw—are themselves middlebrow writers working in that unstable space that divides the cultural elite from the
masses. Operating within a Marxist tradition, Williams sees the bourgeoisie as the class that sets the social and cultural standards that both highbrow and lowbrow authors resist. Ferber’s and Hurst’s characters, as well as their readers, might be surprised by that attitude because they understand that they have no influence on America’s intellectual or political life. Ferber’s and Hurst’s fiction is designed instead to help their readers understand and cope with their world. They do not argue for revolution, nor do they provide a rulebook for entering the upper ranks of society. Unlike Howells, they are not attempting “to make fiction an instrument of cultural pedagogy that would turn the popularity of the novel to the work of cultivating higher tastes in a broad national public” (Panoramas 12). On the other hand, they are not writing merely to entertain their readers. If they are not positioning themselves as moral guides, they are nevertheless trying to critique the values of their society and provide their middle-class readers with diverse viewpoints and ways to approach the problems they are certain to encounter in both their private lives and the public sphere.

The economic environment in which they were raised is another important influence on Ferber’s and Hurst’s work. Both women grew up in families whose middle-class aspirations were destabilized during periods of economic insecurity and their fiction reflects an awareness of the long-term effects of such uncertainty on the lives of individuals and families. Equally important, their fiction reflects the values of the American Progressive movement that arose in reaction to the excesses of the Gilded Age. The historian Lewis L. Gould writes:

Between the end of the depression of the 1890s, and the conclusion of World War I, the United States passed through the Progressive Era, a period of social
change and political ferment. In response to diverse pressures of industrialization, urban growth, and ethnic tension, American society embarked on a myriad of reform movements that, taken together, set the terms for debate on public policy for the succeeding half century. (*Progressive Era*)

Karen Pastorello describes the majority of Progressives as “middle-class women and men seeking to better a society they perceived as suffering from the pitfalls of industrialization” (56). Scholars disagree about whether the era ended before or after World War I; Gould argues that the movement declined after the War, while Pastorello says the Progressive Era was over before the War began. They do agree on the influence on many Progressive activists of the Social Gospel, a Protestant movement that sought to apply Christian ethics to solving social problems. Gould acknowledges that twenty-first century Americans can easily identify “many of the themes that have shaped subsequent national history” within the Progressive movement, including “government regulation of economic power, the application of scientific ideas to social problems, [and] a concern for the quality and preservation of the environment,” but warns against assuming the two eras are identical in most respects (9). In particular, he emphasizes that “Americans in the Progressive Era retained strong allegiance to values that contemporary society has to a large degree discarded—a faith in the perfectibility of mankind, optimism, and a sense of progress, and a belief in general moral standards” (9). Similarly, R. Laurence Moore comments on the roots of many of the unquestioned principles upon which much Progressive thinking was based:

American thinkers entered the progressive period with some very strong convictions. Traditional commitments to democracy and the old-fashioned
virtues of hard work, self-reliance, and individualism informed almost all kinds of thought in the early twentieth century…Men who called themselves pragmatists operated within the limits of certain established, frequently Protestant, principles that Americans never thought to challenge. (“Directions of Thought” 37)

Secular Progressive thinkers shared the optimistic belief that scientific methodology could be applied to solving social problems, as well as a “devout faith in statism, believing that the growing dimensions of the nation’s problems meant that only the government could establish controls necessary to achieve social justice” (Pastorello 164).

Dramatic changes in the American way of life soon put such an optimistic outlook under great pressure. In 1890, the year Ferber and Hurst celebrated their fifth birthdays, the population of the United States approached sixty-three million. The Census Bureau announced that the frontier was closed and the entire continent was settled. Although, as Pastorello writes, the majority of Americans still resided in small towns and rural areas, “living life much as they had before the Civil War” (13) and “the business of America was small business” (26), that way of life would not last much longer. It was quickly followed by the “meteoric growth of large influential enterprises,” including railroads, manufacturing corporations, banks, and large retail stores (26).

Rapid industrialization generated a voracious demand for workers. Some farmers migrated to the cities to seek work in the new factories. Many African Americans left the South to seek employment in the industrial North, although, as Pastorello emphasizes, “African American men found little economic incentive from employers to migrate to Northern cities. The majority of African Americans who made the journey north were
women, most of whom readily found work as domestics…servants or laundresses.” (119). Delilah, the African-American widow in Hurst’s *Imitation of Life*, would have been among the black women seeking domestic work to support herself and her young daughter. Most new industrial jobs, however, were filled by the twenty-million immigrants who came to the United States between 1880 and 1920. According to Census Bureau figures, between 1850 and 1930, the foreign-born population of the United States increased from 2.2 million to 14.2 million. By 1920, the American population exceeded 106 million, with most of the increase attributable to the high rate of immigration. Only about twenty-five percent of Americans still worked on farms and the country was officially classified as an urban nation.

A long-held American myth is that the United States has always provided a welcoming safe-harbor for new immigrants, an ideal reflected in the words of Emma Lazarus’s 1883 “The New Colossus,” which famously appear on the base of the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free/ The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.” In fact, however, not all Americans were happy about the changing demographic reality; as Pastorello writes, “[w]hile the earlier wave of immigrants from Northern and Western Europe, who began to arrive in the 1830s, had generally been welcomed by white native-born Americans, Southern and Eastern European immigrants were not” (51). Although Pastorello does not mention Asian immigrants, more than forty thousand Chinese workers immigrated to the United States between 1870 and 1880. This generated a wave of xenophobia that resulted in the nation’s first federal immigration law, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which barred additional Chinese laborers from entering the country.
A series of restrictive immigration laws followed in 1917, 1921, and 1924—the years in which many of Ferber’s and Hurst’s early faction appeared. The Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson–Reed Act, was designed to limit the number of Italian Catholic and Eastern European Jewish immigrants by creating annual quotas based on the number of people from countries of origin represented in the 1890 census. It also banned immigration of Arabs and Asians and severely restricted the immigration of Africans. As a result, the relatives of Pervus deJong and Roelf Pool in Ferber’s So Big (1924) would have been welcome in the United States when they emigrated from Holland, but Sol Levy, the Jewish peddler in Cimarron, and Hurst’s Jewish families living on Manhattan’s Lower East Side might well have been barred if they tried to emigrate from Eastern Europe during the 1920s. It is unfortunately unnecessary to observe the nativist parallels between that era and our own.

Progressive activists of the 1920s tried to help these new immigrants adjust to life in their new country. In Lummox, Hurst describes how a social-service organization rescues a poor Italian-American young woman from a life of certain squalor and degradation. In addition to recognizing the problems of the immigrant ghettos, however, Hurst also recognizes the potential in their energy and diversity. In one scene, for example, Bertha, the novel’s protagonist, observes life as she walks through the streets of Lower Manhattan:

Banners waved. The banners of the flying gibbets of leggy underwear from high clothes lines. The jargon of Yiddish ran in a tide. More and more old women on hot high stoops. The life of the children close down to sidewalks with the rinds and the drop from the fruit carts.
Then suddenly Prince Street, little Italy, the women with the pot bellies of more and more child bearing, the men debonair with the blackness of hair and the whiteness of teeth. Curving scimitar of Chinese Pell Street, the shape of a mandarin’s little-finger nail; skins the color of apricots. Much further down ran Front Street with its flotsam from the sea and still further down, West Street of the water pipe and fez. Hot, disturbed breaths of alien climes, not soluble one in another, but all soluble in the new world. (106-107)

Through this vivid picture of ghetto life, Hurst contributes to the national discussion of how best to integrate diverse ethnic groups into a broader American society. In spite of the poverty of the ghetto and its “disturbed breaths of alien climes,” she ultimately presents a hopeful vision of a future in which these vastly different ethnic groups assimilate into American society. All is indeed “soluble” in this brave new world.

New immigrants and other racial, ethnic, and religious minorities are not the only people who have struggled to enter mainstream American society. Throughout their fiction, Ferber and Hurst also provide many examples of the unequal treatment of women in all aspects of business life. But rapacious businessmen were often equal-opportunity exploiters and male and female workers alike often labored in unsafe and inequitable working conditions. In Hurst’s short story “The Spangle That Could Be a Tear” (1923), an exhausted young mother laments that she cannot afford to buy her daughter a longed-for Christmas present: “You schemed and wore newspaper next to your skin when your ribbed undershirt would no longer hold the darns and you were glad when Big Bill, who had granulated eyelids from fatigue, had to work Sundays during the coal shortage. But still you could not manage Ellie’s fur tippet...you boxed
Ellie’s ears when she cried for it” (251). For the most part, however, Hurst’s characters passively accept their fate; only Helga, the Swedish immigrant in *Lummox*, argues passionately for collective representation for domestic workers: “Why, we ain’t even got organization. The hod carriers got that much. We can’t tell the truth about the kitchen side of the door, because we ain’t got the voice of organization” (220).

Ferber and Hurst also express strong opinions about America’s evolving cultural landscape. Their sympathies are clearly with the regional and the ethnic. In *Cimarron*, Ferber mocks the overbearing women who try to impose traditional Eastern and Southern cultural values on the new Oklahoma frontier town of Osage. Sabra, the heroine, organizes the Philomathean Club, a woman’s cultural society that functions as “part of their defense against these wilds. After all, a town that boasted a culture club could not be altogether lost” (140). Sabra tells her husband Yancey about their plans, but the irony of his reply is lost on her:

“Why, honey, don’t you know you're making it?”
This she did not take seriously. “And then current events, too.”
“Well, the events in this town are current enough. I'll say that for them. The trick is to catch them as they go by. You girls'll have to be quick.” (141-142)

One of Hurst’s characteristic rhetorical flourishes is to begin her narratives with references to high culture and then turn to the mundane world in which her characters live. This pull between high and low culture is present in the opening paragraphs of her 1918 short story “A Boob Spelled Backward”—“boob” referring to the slang term for a foolish or stupid person:
Richelieu, who walked with kings, presided always at the stitching of his red robes. Boswell says somewhere that a badly starched stock [sic] could kill his Johnson’s morning. It was the hanging of his own chintzes that first swayed William Morris from epic mood to household utensils. Seneca, first in Latin in the whole Silver Age, prepared his own vegetables. There is no outgrowing the small moments of life, and to those lesser ones of us how often they become the large ones! (113)

The scene immediately shifts from these classical references to the image of the “ever so slightly and prematurely bald and still more slightly and prematurely rotund” Samuel Lipkind being kissed awake by his loving mother. Sam then goes off to his job as owner and manager of the Two Dollar Hat Store and Hurst proceeds to tell the story of the large and small moments of the life of this loving, but insignificant, young man, one of the “lesser ones of us” (116).

These arguments in support of the traditional and the ethnic over the elitism of high culture is not surprising. Even though both Ferber and Hurst were born into assimilated families of Western and Central European origin and raised and educated in the United States, they never qualified as members of the elite Eastern intellectual establishment. Their Jewish heritage in particular ensured they would never be part of that world. Even when they became famous writers and hobnobbed with political leaders, writers, actors, and other celebrities (Hurst was friends with Eleanor Roosevelt and Ferber was a member of the famed Algonquin Round Table), their narratives reflect their origins as middle-class Jewish girls with strong midwestern values and a clear eye for what their readers are looking for in a work of fiction.
It is important, however, to recognize that neither Hurst nor Ferber wrote exclusively for a Jewish audience and, although both openly acknowledged their Judaism, neither grew up in an observant family. As a result, their work reflects little knowledge of Jewish texts or thought. It could be argued that their mutual emphasis on social justice links them to Jewish tradition, but it can as easily be argued that this reflects the secular progressive influences of their era. Ferber does write about her personal experiences with anti-Semitism growing up in Iowa, but with the exception of her early novel *Fanny Herself* (1917), her few Jewish characters play supporting roles in her texts and the Old Testament allusions in *Show Boat* reflect only the most widely-known Sunday-school stories. A number of Hurst’s characters are Jewish, but her awareness of the richness and dramatic potential of American-Jewish life was slow in coming and awakened only after she moved to New York City in her twenties; as she acknowledges in her autobiography, “[i]n our middle-western world of assimilated German Jews, and comparatively few of them, this race consciousness had been slow to awaken and then only languidly” (*Anatomy* 18).

Hasia R. Diner’s *Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way* provides a clue as to how best to understand the role their Jewish roots played in Ferber’s and Hurst’s writings. In her description of the typical “peddler’s story,” Diner might well be describing the life of the Sol Levy in *Cimarron*:

In a way it did not matter where he went. The Jewish peddler experience proved remarkably consistent around the world and across time. He knocked, introduced himself to, almost always, a woman who opened the door. He asked her to look
in his bag, or box, or pack. He had to figure out how to ingratiate himself to her, as every sale mattered, and to do so he had to guess what she might want, what message to deploy in talking with her, and how best to charm her into buying this or that…he proffered a range of goods which represented a new, higher, and actually better, standard of living...(4)

In many ways, this serves as a description not only of Sol Levy’s life, but of Edna Ferber’s and Fannie Hurst’s project as well. Both authors work hard to determine “what message to deploy” when talking to their readers. Because women were their primary audience, it was “almost always, a woman who opened the door” to these literary peddlers, who then had to urge their readers to look into the book being presented to them. They gain their readers’ attention through their plots and characters, but also introduce them to a variety of other literary goods and ideas. As Ferber and Hurst argue their world, they help their readers learn to navigate their own.

In reading Ferber and Hurst today, it is important to keep in mind that although Ferber and Hurst are writing during the modernist era, their realistic narratives do not reflect the stylistic experimentation of the literary world around them. (Hurst’s Lummox is the exception.) As a result, literary scholars have generally tended to undervalue their work. In joining the small group of contemporary scholars who are engaged with their texts, I emphasize close reading, a reflection of my early training in the New Criticism. However, because of Ferber’s and Hurst’s deep engagement with the world outside their texts, I also introduce a variety of socio-political sources into my discussion. These provide background information about the issues under consideration and offer different approaches to interpretation of the era about which both authors are writing.
As I have stated, two central questions run throughout my individual chapters: first, how can the United States best incorporate its wide diversity of religious, ethnic, and racial groups into a coherent society, and second, in view of this diversity, what constitutes true “American” culture? My title “Arguing Their World” comes from a Talmudic midrash, a parable intended to illustrate a rabbinic teaching or precept. In this text, a group of learned rabbis debates a question about religious law. One rabbi presents all the possible arguments in the world to support his position and calls on God to agree with him. A heavenly voice offers an opinion in support of his argument, but another learned rabbi interrupts and says the answer must be found on earth and not in heaven.

In the same way, Ferber and Hurst argue that the answers to the question of how best to deal with the critical issues of their time will not be handed down from above but must be resolved by the American people themselves. It is not clear how their first readers would have responded to these ideas. In the clear light of hindsight, readers today will recognize that some of the approaches they write about were naive and thus doomed to failure. Nevertheless, we will also recognize the continued urgency of these issues in our own generation. The social and cultural problems Ferber and Hurst consider throughout their narratives continue to dominate the American agenda, more so today than ever, and the contemporary reader will find in their texts not only a glimpse into a bygone era, but insights into how we can best respond to these issues in our own generation.
CHAPTER 1

“AMERICA AND I”: EDNA FERBER’S CIMARRON AND AMERICAN ATTITUDES TOWARD SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PLURALISM

Edna Ferber’s 1929 novel Cimarron begins in the late 1880s with a description of an elegant dinner party at the Wichita home of Lewis and Felice Venable, “[u]nwilling emigres, war ruined…[t]ransplanted from Mississippi to Kansas more than two decades before” (4). In spite of the family’s post-Civil War decline, the Venables retain their cherished plantation manners and attitudes. As the narrative opens, members of this “vitiated family” (27) are listening to their son-in-law, the dashing Yancey Cravat, describe his participation in the recent Oklahoma land rush. Yancey is a compelling speaker, but he neglects to mention that the Rush involved white settlers vying for land seized by the U.S. government from Native Americans. Nor does he mention that the displaced tribes are now relegated to bleak and barren reservations. At other times, Yancey demonstrates compassion and sensitivity toward the native tribes and other displaced minorities. Here he speaks in the voice of the adventurer who forgets that his explorations often impinge on the rights of others.

Entranced by Yancey’s dramatic tale, the other dinner guests pay no attention to Isaiah, a young black servant who is perched “high above the table, and directly over it, on a narrow board suspended by rods from the lofty ceiling.” Isaiah’s job is to fan the family with a “shoefly of feathery asparagus ferns cut from the early garden” (6).

Although the Civil War is long over, neither the Venables (the association with “venerable” is deliberate) (176) nor Isaiah seems to find anything “untoward in this remnant of Mississippi feudalism” (6-7). Isaiah is situated within the greater family
constellation but so far at its margins that the others can easily ignore his presence. He is necessary to the dinner but unwanted and unwelcome at the table. In the same way as the guests, Isaiah is enthralled by Yancey’s tales of the Rush. He becomes so engrossed in listening to Yancey’s stories that he neglects his job and is repeatedly reminded of his duties by Felice Venable, who chastises him with “[a]n impatient upward glance…together with a sharply admonitory, ‘Ah-saiah!’” (6). But the youth is not destined to remain on the periphery forever; as he leans “farther and farther forward, the better to hear and see all of the scene that was spread beneath him…his slight hold was loosed, and he fell like great black grape from the vine directly into the midst of one of Felice Venable’s white and virgin frosted silver cakes” (31-32).

Felice Venable is enraged by the accident. Ferber has already presented her as an opinionated and domineering woman who is “not very popular with the bustling wives of Wichita. They resented…her indifference to all that went on outside the hedge that surrounded the Venable yard…the…symbol of exclusiveness in that open-faced Kansas town” (5). Now, dropping her mask of gentility, she behaves like the slave mistress she once was. As she rises to strike the terrified child, Isaiah runs to Yancey for protection, hiding “between the man’s legs like a whimpering little dog…locked in the safety of Yancey’s great knees” (32). Isaiah, and with him the place of race and diversity in America, crashes directly into the center of the narrative. At the same time, Ferber plunges into the heart of the debate about how best to integrate the broad range of people of different races, religions, ethnicities, and economic status into one American people.
Isaiah is not the only character in *Cimarron* who unsuccessfully tries to enter so-called normative American society. Even on the frontier, where identities are mutable and the question “who were you at home?” is not always answered honestly, some men and women are never accepted as full members of the community. Sol Levy, for example, is an Eastern-European Jewish immigrant who works first as a peddler throughout the Oklahoma territory and eventually opens a successful retail store in the new frontier town of Osage. His challenge is not only to earn a living; equally important, he must be careful not to threaten members of the local establishment with his foreign manners and religion. Dixie Lee, the town madam, is another outsider; like the Venables, she is a ruined Southern aristocrat who has been forced off her family’s plantation. Her efforts to give up her way of life and settle into bourgeois society are thwarted by the sunbonnets, a group of sanctimonious townswomen who try to superimpose the “respectable” values of their former communities onto their new frontier town. Other outsider characters include Native Americans and an outlaw known as The Kid, all of whom have been displaced by the federal government to make room for the settlers and who demonstrate resistance by refusing to make any attempt to conform to normative lifestyles.

The United States has always been home to a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural population, but until the late twentieth-century, its mainstream culture was shaped by the disproportionate influence of people of white, northern or western European, Protestant descent. Because they dominated the nation’s political, social, cultural, and economic life at the time *Cimarron* was written, I refer to them as “normative” Americans to differentiate them from “outsider” characters such as Sol Levy, Dixie Lee, and Isaiah.
The question of how best to incorporate other cultures into the American mainstream played an important part in the political and social discourse of the early twentieth century and continues to have a major role in the national conversation today. In focusing on Ferber’s commentary about the ways Americans approach this issue, I extend Eliza McGraw’s argument that *Cimarron* depicts the “latent and potentially inflammatory nature of ethnic mixing, but also its potential—and necessity—for a country defining itself, territory by territory” (80). I demonstrate how Ferber uses a series of subplots to articulate different approaches to this issue, ranging from full assimilation of new immigrants and other outsider communities to a multiculturalism that accepts and incorporates ethnic diversity to an extreme nativist call for the “humane but effective” extermination of Native Americans and other minorities (35). In each situation, Sabra Venable Cravat initially expresses prejudice against people of backgrounds other than her own and is surprised by her husband’s fascination with other cultures and his outspoken defense of social and ethnic minorities. With time and experience, however, Sabra comes to understand the value of a diverse society and gains greater respect for others.

Sabra’s maturation from naive young girl into an independent woman and principled civic leader reinforces the theme that underlies Ferber’s text: American expansionism must not only imply territorial growth but must also include an expansion of the national heart so that people of all backgrounds are included within the full range of American society. The author’s vision of a more accepting society is seen in the union of opposites in Sabra and Yancey’s marriage; in keeping with her analysis of other theories of diversity and multiculturalism, Ferber is honest about acknowledging
that the hope for America’s future represented by their son’s mixed-race children is potentially undermined by their daughter’s deep-set prejudices.

To better contextualize my argument that *Cimarron* is Ferber’s contribution to the discussion of how best to incorporate people of diverse backgrounds into American society, I first focus on the ways in which the author introduces into her narrative a discussion of theories of social integration and demonstrates how her characters’ experiences underscore their limitations. These theories include the ideal of the melting-pot, theories of multiculturalism and trans-nationalism, the possibility of social integration resulting from enhanced economic standing, and an attitude in support of genocide that anticipates the Nazi’s “final solution.” I then turn to a consideration of how Yancey and Sabra’s marriage reflects Ferber’s own ideas about how such social integration can best be achieved.

Reading *Cimarron* today, almost ninety years after it was first published, it is important to keep in mind that Ferber’s views are not based on twenty-first century attitudes and although she might well have heard of Horace Kallen, Randolph Bourne, Alain Leroy Locke, and other sociologists and philosophers who contributed to the national discussion during the 1920s, many of her readers would not have been familiar with them. In addition, although she was active in liberal causes throughout her lifetime, some of her references to racial minorities in particular come across as gratuitous and racist, as when she refers to the “kennel” in which Isaiah lives or alludes to Native Americans as “savages.” These are jarring notes in a text so clearly intended to be sensitive to the position of outsiders in the American community. In recognizing Ferber’s own colonialist attitudes—even while she is writing an anti-colonial narrative—we must
also acknowledge that the very fact that our generation is still arguing these issues today means that we too have not yet succeeded in resolving them.

*Cimarron* is not only an exploration of early twentieth-century attitudes toward the social integration of diverse populations. It is also a romance, a novel of formation, and a regional-historical saga. In addition, Ferber intended much of her text as satire and regretted that most readers missed that point. In her 1939 autobiography, she writes that *Cimarron* was “written with a hard and ruthless purpose. It was, and is, a malevolent picture of what is known as American womanhood and American sentimentality. It contains paragraphs and even chapters of satire, and, I am afraid, bitterness, but I doubt that more than a dozen people ever knew this” (*Treasure* 339). This misreading of the author’s intent did not affect the novel’s popularity; it was an immediate best-seller at the time of publication and adapted into blockbuster motion pictures in 1931 and 1960.

*Cimarron* is the story of a strong man and a stronger woman. Together with their young son, the Cravats leave what Yancey dismisses as the “goddamned middle-class respectability” of Wichita to start a new life in the Oklahoma territory (31). They settle in the frontier town of Osage, where Yancey practices law and edits the local newspaper. Their personal story is told against the background of the territory’s growth and development from rough, unsettled land into an oil-rich state.

Like Odysseus, to whom he is compared, Yancey is an adventurer whose lust for action takes him away from home for long periods of time. Unlike Penelope, however, Sabra does not spend her nights undoing the day’s work. During Yancey’s absences, she raises their children, edits and publishes the town newspaper, establishes culturally
uplifting women’s organizations, and eventually serves as Osage County’s first elected Congressional representative. Their daughter Donna is a conventional young woman intent on marrying a wealthy man. Their son Cim, on the other hand, is fascinated by native culture and Sabra eventually comes to accept his marriage to the daughter of an Osage chief. Sabra remains faithful to Yancey throughout his many absences and the novel ends with their reunion in an oil field, husband and wife professing deep love for each other as Yancey dies in Sabra’s arms.

As Ferber works to destabilize the theories of assimilation and exclusion current in her generation, she rewrites much of the standard narrative of America’s western expansion. J.E. Smyth considers Cimarron a novel of formation that works to restore women to a central position in the narrative of the American West, observing that “[t]o a certain extent, Ferber’s historical novel anticipates many of the revisionist historiographic arguments about the frontier as a masculine space. With Cimarron, Ferber offered a new perspective on western history, one that privileged the perspectives of two groups often ignored in traditional accounts of the frontier—women and Native Americans” (118). Although Smyth applauds Ferber’s description of Sabra’s personal growth during the course of the novel, Donna Campbell argue that Sabra should be included among the sunbonnets the author is satirizing (“Hard and Ruthless Purpose” 30). In addition, both Campbell and Heidi Kenaga emphasize the ways in which Ferber destabilizes the sentimental trope of the pioneer woman as a “Madonna of the Prairie” who willingly subordinates her life to the needs of her ultra-masculine husband.
Smyth recognizes that “[i]t is tempting to see *Cimarron*, with its mixed-race hero, tough-minded heroine, and sustained critique of frontier expansion, as a corrective to the nativist trends in American literature during the 1920s.” However, she agrees with Walter Benn Michaels that “one of the tenets of modernist nativism was the tendency to cherish Native [American] ancestors precisely because they were a vanishing race and therefore safe to assimilate within the national mythology” (126) and concludes that “[i]t is no accident that the drive for Indian citizenship coincided with the passage of staunch anti-immigration laws during the 1920s” (126). Kenaga echoes this view, noting that the increase in racial nativism in the United States during the World War I years was “coupled with an increasingly nostalgic belief that the frontier heritage and its racial and gender ideologies were now dangerously imperiled in the new century” (171). McGraw focuses on the ways in which *Cimarron* reflects the “ethnic and racial anxieties…that arise as the territory defines itself.” Observing that the narrative represents “America writ small” and that “settlement [of the frontier] gives rise both to emotional and literal bloodshed as well as a productive future, undertaken by turns reluctantly and auspiciously” (65), McGraw provides a balanced, but generally positive, view of Ferber’s attitude toward the nation’s future.

Amanda Zinck quotes Jane Simonsen in describing Sabra’s attitude toward Isaiah as one of “imperial domesticity” and emphasizes the many ways in which the attitudes of the sunbonnets reflect a condescending colonialism:

[Ferber] implicates American feminism for its colonial underpinnings and probes the complexities and costs of the relations between the colonizer and the colonized… In *Cimarron*, border-crossing and boundary-blurring demystify staid
beliefs about American femininity and masculinity, class distinction and work ethic, and biological markers of racial difference. (67)

Zinck’s discussion of how Ferber’s “boundary-blurring” serves to “demystify staid beliefs” relating to gender, class, and race can be extended to the way all social and economic outsiders are represented in the novel. In this context, it is important to note that only Sol Levy is an actual immigrant. All the other outsiders are native-born Americans. In this way, Ferber reminds her readers that the United States has always been home to a diverse population.

“What, then, is the American…?”

Few, if any, of Ferber’s readers would have participated in the Oklahoma land rush she so vividly describes and their personal experience with people of different ethnic backgrounds would most likely have been in connection with the new immigrants who flooded into the country between 1880 and 1920, the decades during which *Cimarron* takes place. Lady Liberty still lifted her lamp beside the golden door when *Cimarron* was published in 1929, but her arm was getting tired, at least in the minds of those who claimed that the country belonged exclusively to people of a certain ethnic background and socio-economic class. Between 1880 and 1920, more than twenty million immigrants entered the United States, most of them from Southern and Eastern Europe and Asia. They were welcomed as workers necessary to support a rapidly-industrializing nation, but also faced an increasing xenophobia that resulted in the nation’s first federal immigration law, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This Act was followed by a series of immigration laws passed in 1917, 1921, and 1924 that were
intended to ensure ethnic homogeneity in the United States. In spite of these restrictions, American xenophobia did not abate. During World War I, anti-German sentiment became so intense that libraries publicly burned books written by German authors and American symphony orchestras refused to play music by German composers, a topic I discuss in Chapter 2. Such restrictions did not apply to internal migration. Between 1910 and 1930, for example, more than 1,600,000 African Americans moved from the rural South to the industrial North, a demographic change that also resulted in an increase in subtle and overt acts of racism.

Although the Venables would be reluctant to admit it, they share a common experience with the characters they consider their social inferiors: each has been driven from his place of origin. Isaiah’s ancestors came to the United States as slaves out of Africa, Sol Levy fled the Eastern European pogroms, and The Kid was chased off the free range by a federal government intent on opening the land for private development. The Venables would resent being lumped together with such people but they too are displaced persons. Indeed, in their own minds, their expulsion from their Mississippi plantation after the Civil War was an act of Biblical-like proportion that is reflected in the surname of Cousin Jouett Goforth, which calls to mind God’s injunction to Abram to “go forth from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen.12:1-2).

The United States is often described as a “melting pot” in which people of different backgrounds are transformed into what J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur called “the American, this new man.” He is:
…either an European or the descendant of an European; hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. (de Crevecoeur, “Letter III”)

The term “melting pot” originated in the title of a 1908 play by Israel Zangwill in which a new immigrant describes the United States as “God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming!” (The Melting Pot). In Cimarron, Ferber uses the characters of Isaiah, The Kid, and the Native Americans to underscore the limitations of such “melting and re-forming” and to argue that there are situations in which the melting-pot theory of assimilation simply does not work.

From the moment of his dramatic entry into the center of the narrative, Isaiah personifies what W. E. B. DuBois calls the “warring ideals” of being both black and American. No matter how much Isaiah tries, the white community will not accept him and his innocent attempts to participate in the westward journey of national expansion become increasingly disruptive. Ultimately, his actions can no longer be tolerated and his final violation of “white and virgin” space leads to his horrifying death.

In a scene early scene, for example, Isaiah begs the Cravats to let him join their journey to the Oklahoma territory. When they refuse, he stows away by hiding inside a
carpet packed inside one of their wagons. As Yancey makes camp their first night on the road, Sabra hears her husband call out in surprise:

A squeal of terror from the bundle of carpeting in his arms—a bundle that suddenly was alive and wriggling. Yancey dropped it with an oath. The bundle lay on the ground a moment, heaving, then it began to unroll itself while...[they] regarded it with starting eyes. A black paw, a wooly head, a face all open mouth and whites of eyes. Black Isaiah. He had found a way to come with them to the Indian Territory. (48)

The reduction of Isaiah to a series of body parts expressed in terms of the racial stereotypes of “[a] black paw, a wooly head, a face all open mouth and whites of eyes” is shocking to the twenty-first century reader. Part of the problem for the contemporary reader is that the purpose of Ferber’s rhetorical strategy is not clear. Would the novel’s original white readers accept this description without question? Or is it designed to critique the way white people typically look at the black body, anticipating Homi Bhabha’s statement that “[b]lack skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body” (Location of Culture 91). Is it intended as a loving, albeit condescending, image of a naive young man determined to participate in the great American adventure? Does it reflect the author’s own unexamined paternalism and racism or is it a failed satire directed against the injustices perpetrated by normative Americans? The text is not clear on this point and the interpretation depends as much on the mindset of the reader as the intent of the author. In any event, it is an
uncomfortable moment in a narrative intended to help promote ethnic and racial harmony.

Although Isaiah quickly becomes an essential member of the traveling unit—within a few hours, Yancey and Sabra “were wondering how they had got on at all without him” (49)—he never becomes a full member of the family unit. This is reflected in the scene in which Sabra and Yancey walk to the Osage community’s first church service. They become aware that the townspeople are laughing and pointing at something going on behind them; turning, they see Isaiah “strutting in an absurd and yet unmistakably recognizable imitation of Yancey’s stride and swing” and dressed in an imitation of Yancey’s elaborate Western outfit:

Around his waist was wound a red calico sash, and over that hung a holstered leather belt so large for his small waist that it hung to his knees and bumped against them at every step…On his head was a battered—an unspeakable—sombrero which he must have salvaged from the backyard debris. But this was not, after all, the high point of his sartorial triumph. He had found somewhere a pair of Yancey’s discarded boots…Into these wrecks of splendor Isaiah had thrust, as far as possible, his own great bare splay feet. (112)

McGraw calls Isaiah’s imitation of Yancey’s outfit a “burlesque” that “throws the novel’s tension into high relief in a moment of carnival” (69). I believe the transgression is far more serious. Isaiah illustrates DuBois’s claim that the African American lacks self-identity because the world in which he lives “yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (qtd. Menand 395). His behavior also exemplifies Bhabha’s concept of colonial mimicry, the “area
between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double” (Location of Culture 85). The danger of such mimicry is contained in “its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (Location of Culture 87). Mikhail Batkhin argues forcefully that such destabilization of authority has lasting impact on society, but I agree with Terry Eagleton’s argument that it is in reality “a kind of fiction: a temporary retexualizing of the social formation” (149). In this reading, carnival becomes an “authorized” form of transgression and thus only a mimicry of change. The “moment of carnival” to which McGraw refers is thus able to subvert normative values only when all parties understand that their roles are to be reversed for a brief and well-defined period of time and that the social order will then return to normal. Isaiah does not understand this; he sincerely believes he can fit in and become a full member of American society. The citizens of Osage first attempt to control the situation by hiding behind condescending smiles but they know they must quickly move to stop Isaiah’s potential to destabilize, and thus potentially overthrow, their authority.

This scene parallels Isaiah’s earlier invasion of white space when he falls into the cake at the Venables’ home in Wichita. Just as her mother immediately reverts to her role of Southern slave-mistress, Sabra too drops any pretense of frontier equality and rushes to strike the boy “in a kind of swoop of rage.” As in the earlier incident, Yancey protects and defends Isaiah. The depth of the divide between the races is reinforced when the bewildered youth explains his actions: “Ah didn’t go f’ to fret nobody. You-all was dress up fine fo’ church meetin’ so I crave to dress myself up Sunday style” (113).
His poignant imitation of white behavior is intended as a compliment, not as mockery, but fails utterly.

In addition to illustrating the marginal and insecure position of the African American, this scene also serves as a satiric description of the pretensions of the mainstream community. Although the church service will be held in a “gambling den and saloon which was packed to suffocation” (112), Sabra and Yancey “stepped sedately down the street” as though heading to an elegant house of worship. The road along which they stroll is dusty and unpaved, but the “dashing” Yancey is dressed in a formal Prince Albert frock coat and Sabra is not wearing “her second-best black grosgrain, but her best, and the hat with the plumes” (111). Isaiah’s mimicry of their inappropriate outfits reinforces Ferber’s satire as the youth “managed, by the very power of his dramatic gift, to give to the appreciative onlooker a complete picture of Yancey Cravat in ludicrous—in grotesque miniature” (112).

Isaiah’s final transgression takes place when he fathers a mixed-race child with a young woman of the Osage tribe. This act crosses the forbidden racial boundary and leads directly to his death. Yancey has been away from home for an extended period, leaving Sabra to run both the newspaper and the household. Although she still patronizingly thinks of Isaiah as a child, he is now a man. When Arita Red Feather, a member of the Osage tribe and the Cravats’ domestic worker, gives birth to a baby boy, Sabra immediately realizes that Isaiah is the father: “His hair was coarse and kinky. His nose was wide. His lips were thick. He was a Negro child” (195). Sabra wants the young couple to marry, but the town doctor explains this is not possible because “[t]he Osages don’t marry Negroes. It’s forbidden…the Osages, except for intermarriage with whites,
have kept the tribe pure" (195). Prophetically, the doctor adds, “This is a bad business" (197). In a scene of horrifying brutality, the Osage spirit Isaiah, Arita, and their infant son away from the Cravats’ home, bind Isaiah to a stake, and set a rattlesnake to kill him with its poison. As for Arita and their infant son:

Arita Red Feather and her child had been bound together, placed in an untanned and uncured steer hide, the hide was securely fastened, they were carried then to the open, sun-baked, and deserted prairie and left there, with a guard. The hide shrank and shrank and shrank in the burning sun, closer and closer, day by day, until soon there was no movement within it. (199)

This torture tragically echoes the earlier scene in which Isaiah wraps himself inside a carpet in order to stow away with the Cravats. In an ironic twist, the medium through which Isaiah tries to join in the great national adventure becomes instead the medium of his own child’s torture and death. Anticipating her readers’ immediate reaction to this scene, Ferber goes out of her way to explain in the novel’s preface that this horror is “based on actual happenings" (xv). But the scene is more nuanced than straightforward historical reportage; Ferber also uses it to comment on universal attitudes of racism. Thus, in spite of the oppression the Osage have experienced at the hands of the U.S. government and the settlers, they too reject mixed native-African American unions. There is not yet room for the African American in the melting pot of assimilation.
“An American in the Street and a Jew in the Home”

Although the Venables may never willingly accept different types of people into their world, some Americans have always been more open minded. In the early 1900s, the philosopher and social theorist Horace Kallen proposed a way for Americans of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds to live side-by-side, if not fully together. Born in 1882 to Jewish parents in German Silesia, Kallen’s family immigrated to the United States when he was a child. A lifelong advocate of cultural diversity, Kallen believed that a strong independent ethnic identity was not inconsistent with national pride. He is credited with originating the expression “cultural pluralism” to describe the way in which minority groups could assume a kind of dual identity that would enable them to participate in mainstream American public life and at the same time retain their private ethnic or national identity. Kallen was the son of a rabbi and his theory of cultural pluralism reflects ideas of the Haskala, or Jewish enlightenment, which encouraged European Jews to integrate into secular society by separating their public and private behaviors so that, in the words of the nineteenth-century poet Judah Leib Gordon, they would “[b]e a man abroad and a Jew in your tent” (“Awake My People” 384).

Kallen uses the metaphor of a “symphony of civilizations” to illustrate the way diverse cultures could potentially be fused into a unique American identity. In this orchestra:

...every type of instrument has its specific timbre and tonality, founded in its substance and form; as every type has its appropriate theme and melody in the whole symphony, so in society each ethnic group is the natural instrument, its temper and culture are its theme and melody, and the harmony and dissonances
and discords of them all make the symphony of civilizations, [where] . . . the range and variety of the harmonies may become wider and richer and more beautiful. (qtd. Meyer 25)

According to the historian Sidney Ratner, Kallen believed that:

Americanization in the most liberal sense of the term involved not the destruction of all the distinctive cultural group traits other than those of the dominant Anglo-Saxons, but the cherishing and preserving of every ethnic group’s cultural heritage—language, art, literature, music, customs—within the overarching framework of the common use of the English language and adherence to the prevailing political and economic system. (187)

Cultural pluralism should not be understood as an approach to full social integration; taken to its logical conclusion, it can lead to a separate-but-equal society in which everyone knows his place—and remains there. As Louis Menand writes, Kallen did not “think of pluralism as a means to facilitate social mobility; he thought of it as a means to eliminate the lure of social mobility” (394). Equally important, Kallen completely ignored the untenable situation of African Americans and avoided any discussion of racism in the United States until late in his career. At its worst, Kallen’s pluralism could become “a formula for a kind of non-invidious segregation” (Menand 394).

In contrast to the melting-pot and cultural pluralism, Randolph Bourne’s theory of transnationalism anticipates contemporary theories of multiculturalism in many ways. Bourne first articulated his philosophy in 1916 in an essay in The Atlantic Monthly in which he argues that the assimilationist ideal of the melting pot is failing because “[w]e
are all foreign-born or the descendants of foreign-born, and if distinctions are to be made between us they should rightly be on some other ground than indigenousness” (87). Instead of insisting on a universal American culture in which ethnic distinctions are erased, Bourne put forward the idea of the United States as a federation of cultures in which diverse groups work together to accomplish mutual civic interests while at the same time retaining their unique cultural identities. He emphasizes that immigrant groups do not lose their unique ethnic identities as they become established in the United States. Instead, they begin “to cultivate more and more assiduously the literatures and cultural traditions of their homelands” and concludes that assimilation, “instead of washing out the memories of Europe, made them more and more intensely real. Just as these clusters became more and more objectively American, did they become more and more German or Scandinavian or Bohemian or Polish” (86). Instead of a melting pot, Bourne calls for a type of “co-operative Americanism” in which all the country’s nationalities are free to simultaneously maintain “distinct cultural allegiances” and “common political allegiance and common social ends” (qtd. Meyer 99-100). “Most importantly,” Menand stresses, Bourne “praised cultural identity in order to transcend it. Bourne’s ideal was not Americanism; it was an international cosmopolitanism which America might lead by example” (403).

Bourne was a member of an old Yankee family that, in the same way as the Venables, lost much of its social status when it lost its money. Kallen was a Jew who broke away from his religion as a young man and developed his theory of cultural pluralism as he was reconnecting with his ethnic roots. Both men promoted theories that called for the public expression of Americanism and a private ethnicity. In Cimarron, on
the other hand, Sol Levy understands all too well that he will never be truly included within the larger community: “He was the town Jew. He was a person apart” (151). Sol Levy, with his “beautiful, civilized face” and “long slender hands” (150), is one of Ferber’s most sensitive and compelling characters.

Sol is a target for both overt and subtle anti-Semitism. As he peddles his wares throughout the territory, “[t]hey turned the dogs on him. The children cried, ‘Jew! Jew!’” (149). Once settled in Osage and proprietor of the successful “Levy Mercantile Trading Company,” he becomes a wealthy and charitable citizen. Nevertheless, he continues to experience religious discrimination. During the town’s rough frontier days, Yancey has to rescue him from physical assault. As Osage becomes a more sophisticated community, Sol is subjected to a more subtle kind of anti-Semitism, as when the townspeople politely, but pointedly, ignore Yancey’s suggestion that Sol be appointed mayor. He remains passive in the face of these personal and physical attacks, demonstrating resistance only in the defense of his faith. Like the rare animals in the small zoo he maintains to attract customers to his department store, Sol is an exotic animal in Osage, welcome as long as he maintains his outsider status, and, in particular, does not demonstrate sexual needs or urges. In this way, he reinforces the stereotype of the Jewish man as intelligent and compassionate but ultimately passive and sexually non-threatening. By maintaining the integrity of his religious culture, Sol represents the Jews as “a people that dwells alone, not reckoned among the nations” (Num. 23: 8-9). Through his story, Ferber demonstrates that intellectualized theories such as cultural pluralism and trans-nationalism are not always effective in a dynamic,
living society. Safe from the European pogroms, but alone and isolated in his life in Osage, Sol Levy might well agree.

“The Land Was Ours before We Were the Land’s”

Three other characters—Dixie Lee, the town madam, an outlaw known as The Kid, and the undifferentiated groups of Native Americans who form a shadowy presence in both Wichita and Osage—provide other examples of social outsiders who have limited success in assimilating into the normative community.

In the same way as the Venables, Dixie is “a descendant of decayed Southern aristocracy” (119). Displaced by the Civil War and betrayed by a bad man, she is forced to make her way in the world alone. This is a typical situation for a Ferber heroine but, unlike Sabra’s experience, Dixie’s career choice makes her a moral outsider. Sabra and Yancey are at odds over her role. Sabra and the moralistic sunbonnets despise Dixie for what she represents. Yancey is both more open-minded and open-hearted; as a sexually experienced man, he recognizes that she provides an essential service for men without women and that her elegant brothel also provides an atmosphere of refinement otherwise missing in the rough frontier town: “It was, in a way, a club, a rendezvous, a salon. For hundreds of men who came there it was all they had every known of richness, of color, of luxury” (185). In this way, Dixie’s position in Osage is similar to that of Sol Levy, who makes himself useful to the frontier women by providing luxury items as well as household essentials: “Pins, sewing-machine needles, rolls of gingham and calico…and last, craftily, his Hamburg lace…He brought news, too” (149).
Dixie’s story emphasizes the interconnection of economics and morality in society. Her financial status changes when oil is discovered on her land. Once she becomes a wealthy woman, she tries to leave her past behind by moving to Oklahoma City, buying a house “in a decent neighborhood” and adopting a baby girl (273). But “the women of Osage got wind of it...perhaps someone recognized her on the street, though she looked like any plump and respectabile matron now.” Her attempt to enter mainstream society fails: “They took the child away from her by law. Six months later Dixie Lee died; the sentimental said of a broken heart” (273). Yancey puts it another way: “She was murdered by the good women of Osage...” (274). Even in a frontier town, Yancey—and Ferber—are saying, the rules of middle-class morality are firm and there is no room in normative American society for a woman who has been an embarrassment to the community. Even her newfound wealth cannot redeem her. Dixie’s presence can be tolerated as long as she remains a permanent outsider, but she crosses the line when she attempts to become a mother. Ferber is arguing that the values of the open frontier are as conservative and exclusionary in their own way as those of the decayed Southern society from which Dixie and the Venables both come and that the myth that the American frontier was a place of openness and equality is just that—a myth.

Dixie also provides an important contrast to Sabra. Both women must depend on their own efforts in order to earn a living. Dixie is good at her work, “essentially a commercial woman—shrewd, clear headed” (184). Sabra is also a capable, pragmatic businesswoman and on the surface, the two would seem to have much in common. But Dixie’s profession situates her outside the moral boundaries established by the
mainstream community. Sabra, on the other hand, is comfortable within these boundaries. Even during Yancey’s extended absences, which are accompanied by rumors of his own extra-marital romances, she does not seek romance with another man. Indeed, “[t]hose…years had served to accentuate her spinsterish qualities; had made her more and more powerful; less human; had slowed the machinery of her emotional equipment” (205). Although Sabra is a pathbreaker for women in many ways, she willingly accepts a secondary status in her marriage. Ferber makes this clear in a scene late in the novel. Yancey and Sabra are arguing about a controversial article he wants to run in the town newspaper. Sabra objects but Yancey declares: “I’ll run the story, by God, as I want it run, and they can shoot me for it.” Sabra, who has been editing the newspaper during her husband’s absence, replies:

“And I say you won’t. You can’t come in here like that. I’m editor of this paper.”

…Without a word he grasped her wrist and led her out, across the old porch, down the steps and into the street. There, on Pawhuska Avenue, in the full glare of noonday, he pointed to the weather-worn sign that he himself…had hung there almost twenty years before. She had had it painted and repainted. She had had it repaired. She had never replaced it with another.

THE OKLAHOMA WIGWAM

YANCEY CRAVAT PROP. AND EDITOR

“When you take that down, Sabra honey, and paint your own name up in my place, you’ll be the editor of this newspaper. Until you do that, I am.”

As they stood there…she knew that she never would do it. (270)
Dixie is a totally self-sufficient woman and pays the ultimate price for her independence. Sabra is more skilled at negotiating her place in a society dominated by hyper-masculine men on the one hand and the hypocritical sunbonnets on the other. Ferber is reminding her readers that women can succeed in their society if they are willing to adhere to community norms but will inevitably pay a heavy price for their independence.

The story of The Kid, the cowboy driven off the free range as a result of government policy, represents a different aspect of the failure of assimilationist and multicultural ideals. Vicious bandits are not often considered candidates for successful social integration but, as Yancey explains, The Kid’s way of life is not entirely his own fault: “The government at Washington made him an outlaw.” In the same way as his father and grandfather before him, The Kid once rode “the free range that never belonged to them really, but that they had come to think of as theirs through right of use” (93-94). When his way of life is destroyed, he “couldn’t fight progress, but...[he] could get revenge on the people who had taken...[his] world away” from him (94).

The Kid is not a frontier Robin Hood who nobly steals from the rich to give to the poor. His remorseless criminal acts not only demonstrate resistance to the government and the self-righteous settlers who have destroyed his way of life but are also acts of violence against the land and its native inhabitants. In the same way as the innocent Isaiah and the independent Dixie, The Kid comes to a sad end that illustrates the limitations of ethnic and social absorption and underscores the point made by the philosopher and social theorist Alain Leroy Locke that “for all its boasted absorption of types,” the United States “absorbs them only to re-make them or re-cast them into a
national mold” (qtd. Menand 397). For those who cannot be remade or recast into this normative “national mold,” Ferber is warning, death is the only possible outcome.

Because the federal government has driven him from the land he loves in the same way as it has reneged on its treaties with the Native Americans, The Kid also serves as a metaphorical bridge between the white and the native communities. The Kid makes only a few brief, violent appearances. The Indians, on the other hand, are an ongoing presence, and provide a “sad yet colorful pattern” against which Ferber sets her vivid descriptions of America’s western expansion (135). The opening chapters provide insight into the local tribes who live near the Venables’ home in Wichita. Once proud and free, they “seemed tame enough now, herded together on their reservations, spirit broken, pride destroyed” (37). Nevertheless, “somewhere black implacable resentment smoldered in the heart of this dying race” (34) and the different native tribes somehow manage to maintain a sense of pride and exceptionalism in the face of their continued degradation at the hands of the federal government and the white settlers. This resistance is expressed in part by their refusal to reveal themselves to their oppressors. They observe the settlers from behind “immobile parchment” faces, viewing “the proceedings impassively” and expressing themselves freely only in the privacy of their own communities:

Later, on their reservations, with no white man to see and hear, they would gossip like fishwives; they would shake with laughter; they would retail (sic) this or that absurdity which, with their own eyes, they had seen the white man perform. They would slap their knees and rock with mirth. (117)
The settlers both fear and despise what they perceive as these “silent, slothful, yet sinister figures” (34). They fail to recognize that it is the white man, not the Native American, who is the interloper on tribal lands. Yancey defends the Native Americans; to Sabra’s surprise, he “seemed actually to consider them as human beings” (36). He explains to his wife that “[t]hey were given that land—the barest, meanest desert land in the whole of the Oklahoma country. And the government of these United States said, ‘There, you red dogs, take that and live on it. And if you can’t live on it, then die on it’” (269). Mother Bridget, a nun who teaches school in Wichita, also expresses compassion for the tribes. When Sabra tells her that the federal government has opened the Oklahoma territory to the settlers, Mother Bridget sighs, “So. It’s come to that. They’ve opened it to the whites after all—the land that was to belong to the Indians forever. ‘As long as grass grows and the rivers flow.’ That’s what the treaty said. H’m. Well, what next!” (39). The tribal pride of the Native Americans will not permit assimilation into a melting pot and because the settlers seem determined to suppress and subordinate them, there is no room for a type of cultural pluralism in which two separate-but-equal societies live side-by-side, if not together.

The presence of Native Americans in the Wichita region gives rise to the novel’s most chilling expression of racial prejudice. This attitude is articulated by Sabra’s father, Lewis Venable, who expresses the xenophobic belief that unwanted minority communities should be exterminated. It is at first surprising that this “futile, fumbling, gentle man” (8), so clearly henpecked by his strong-minded wife, is the most overtly racist character in the novel. Nevertheless, his racism is both vicious and extreme. Calling Native Americans “a sore on the benign bosom of an otherwise healthy
government," he openly supports acts of genocide, hypocritically softening his position by suggesting that their “extermination” should be carried out “by some humane but effective process” (35).

Lewis Venable articulates an extreme opinion, but he is hardly alone in his prejudice against Native Americans. His daughter dislikes them as well. Growing up in Wichita, “Indians were no novelty…Sabra had seen them all her life” (32); to her, they are no more than “dirty and useless two-footed animals” (36). Her attitude does not mellow when the family arrives in Oklahoma, where she still “hated them, even feared them” (136). Only after her son Cim's marriage to the daughter of a tribal chief does Sabra begin to overcome her prejudice.

It should be noted that, although the early years of the novel are set in the 1880s, Cimarron was published five years after the U.S. Congress passed the Indian Citizenship Act, which granted citizenship rights to native peoples. During the 1920s, the rest of the normative community in Osage does become somewhat more tolerant of Native Americans but Ferber makes it clear that this is not due to a liberalization of their attitudes. It comes about because oil is discovered on the barren lands of the Osage reservation and members of the tribe are now millionaires. Although Dixie Lee is socially rejected even when she becomes a wealthy woman, the normative community begins to pay more respectful attention to the new Native American consumers. Ferber’s describes this change, which is closely connected to the tribe's increasing materialism, in a tone that is both angry and satiric. One example of their new status within the community is the “Indian News” society column that begins to appear regularly in the local newspaper. Everyone in town is now aware that “Grandma Standing Woman of
near Hominy was a visitor at the home of Red Paint Woman" and "Red Bird Scabby has left the Reservation for a visit to Colorado Springs and Manitou" (277). Because "[m]oney was now the only standard" (303), Native Americans are suddenly more than welcome in the shops and stores of the thriving town. But because "oil was oil, and Indians were Indians" (307), the values they assume, in the same way as Isaiah’s Sunday-gone-to-meeting outfit, are nothing more than costumes worn in imitation of the white man:

The Osages still whirled up and down the Oklahoma roads, and those roads, for hundreds of miles, were still unpaved red prairie dust. They crashed into ditches and draws and culverts as of old, walked back to town and, entering the automobile salesroom in which they had bought the original car, pointed with one dusky finger at a new and glittering model.

"'Nother," they said, succinctly. And drove out with it. (307)

Both Isaiah in his Sunday-going-to-meeting outfit and the Osage in their new cars provide ironic commentary on the establishment community’s behavior. In addition, they bring to mind Jacques Lacan’s comment that “[t]he effect of mimicry is camouflage…It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare” (99). Picking up on Ayelet Zohar’s comment that by “furthering the discussion of mimicry, camouflage and disappearance…[Lacan] expands on issues of visibility and identity as these are performed for the gaze of the viewer” (“Elusive Portrait”), we should question who the “viewer” is in Ferber’s context. If she intends the “viewer” to be the settler community, we recognize her critique of the mimicry of Isaiah and the tribes
that is characterized by scorn, anger, and condescension. But if Ferber also regards her readers as “viewers,” she is challenging them to acknowledge their own ambiguous responses to the attempts of outsiders to camouflage themselves and become part of the normative community.

Commenting on the same passage in Lacan, Bhabha writes that the threat of mimicry “comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory ’identity effects’ in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no ‘itself.’ And that form of resemblance is the most terrifying thing to behold” (“Mimicry” 131). Similarly, in Cimarron, Ferber argues that by trying to conform to normative values, Isaiah and the Osages lose their sense of authentic identity and throw light on the emptiness of the values they are mimicking. It is ironic that although Ferber makes clear her disdain for social integration based on economic status, in fact the exercise of excessive materialism and consumerism may succeed in gaining greater acceptance for the Native Americans and other outsiders into normative American society than the idealistic approaches of the melting pot, cultural assimilation, and transnationalism.

“Gossip Said This; Slander Whispered That”

Throughout her narrative, Ferber interrogates a variety of contemporary ideas for creating a strong, unified American identity, ranging from the ideal of the forging d’Tocqueville’s “new man” in the melting pot of assimilation at one end to Lewis Venable’s horrific vision of ethnic cleansing at the other. Part of her challenge is to present her readers with her own view of how the United States can best create a
unified society out of its diverse populations. She undertakes this through her
description of the Cravats’ complicated marriage and Yancey’s belief that their mixed-
race grandchildren represent the potential for the American future. Consistent with the
way she discusses other theories of developing an American identity, Ferber presents
both the strengths and potential weaknesses of her recommended approach.

Sabra and Yancey are truly the opposites that attract. They are very different
kinds of people, yet each represents a quintessential American type. Yancey is the
open-minded adventurer seeks out an infinite variety of peoples, cultures, and
experiences, but who unconsciously betrays even the people he loves most. Sabra is
the pragmatic and efficient leader who tends to rigidity and intolerance. The combination
and recombination of their personalities throughout their marriage reflect Ferber’s
approach to an American future based on the acceptance of diversity.

Yancey’s intimate knowledge of Native American customs and language
immediately suggests that he is of mixed-race background and passing as white.
McGraw and Smyth both make this assumption. Smyth, for example, criticizes Yancey
for being “a mixed-blood Native American…[who] spends much of his life exploiting his
own people” (121). In fact, however, Ferber provides little definitive information about
Yancey’s background. Whatever is rumored about him is “clouded with myths and
surmises. Gossip said this; slander whispered that” (11). We learn that he “rode the
range” (21) when he first “came [to the Oklahoma territory] twenty years ago” (290) and
that he speaks at least a few words of the Osage language (65-66). But part of his
background is also clearly situated in the white establishment community. He trained
both as a lawyer and a journalist, professions associated with the educated elite. In
addition, he has broad knowledge of European thought and civilization, frequently and familiarly quoting a variety of texts that range from the Old and New Testaments to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Lord Byron, Charles Dickens, Homer, Henrik Ibsen, John Milton, Plutarch, Alexander Pope, and an obscure nineteenth-century British poet named Adelaide Anne Procter (226).

Yancey’s background is deliberately ambiguous. It might be argued, for example, that he has Mexican parentage; indeed, early in the novel Ferber explains that his nickname, “Cimarron,” is “a Spanish word meaning wild or unruly” (11). However, while this implies a possible Mexican connection, it is never made clear whether one or both of his parents is of Latino descent, whether he lived among the Mexicans or other Latino groups long enough to have been given a nickname, or whether his companions on the range so called him because of his nonconformist behavior and wild, unruly streak. To argue that he is of mixed Mexican-American blood simply because he has a Latino nickname is a little like arguing that Sabra must be partly Jewish because her name is a common word in modern Hebrew. Indeed, Yancey’s given name further self-deconstructs, because “Yancey” is a Native American word for “Englishman,” indicating that he is an outsider among the native community as well. He may have been so named by a tribe because of mixed Caucasian-Indian background, because both parents were English speakers who themselves lived among the Indians, or because it was given to him when he was adopted into a native tribe on one of his adventures. Ferber provides no further information.

Yancey is knowledgeable about tribal ways and outspoken in his support for Native Americans, but his lust for adventure repeatedly leads him into situations in
which he acts against their interests. In this sense, he exemplifies Edward Said’s idea of Orientalism. Although we most often think of Said in terms of his construction of East/West, his theory can be applied as well to the condescension of the Western majority to the subaltern native tribes. Said writes that “[i]n a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (15). This observation can be extended not only to Ferber’s description of the settlers’ condescension to the Native Americans but also toward Ferber’s own description of Isaiah as a series of body parts in the scene in which he emerges from the blanket within which he stows away on the Cravats’ journey west.

Yancey is a type of Odysseus who has been transplanted from ancient Greece to late-nineteenth/early twentieth-century America. Ferber makes this connection explicit when he returns home after prospecting for gold in Alaska and relates his adventures to an admiring group of local men: “And so he stood, this Odysseus, and wove for them this new chapter in his saga” (207). Rumors about his racial background should thus be taken as just that—rumors. Yancey is a man of many contradictions. His respect for Native Americans does not keep him from enthusiastically joining in the land rushes that exploit them and their ancestral territory. His love of the natural beauty of the American West does not keep him from willingly working at oil sites that degrade the land.

In addition to his ambiguous racial background and mutable ethics, Yancey is portrayed in terms that are both resolutely male and intensely feminine. He is identified by “his bulk, his virility, his appearance of enormous power” (9). At the same time, “[h]is eyelashes were long and curling, like a beautiful girl’s” (9) and “his feet were small and
arched like a woman’s” (10). In her description of Yancey “weaving” his tale for the men of Osage, Ferber again associates him with both the masculine and the feminine, linking him both to Odysseus and Odysseus’s wife Penelope, who spends her days weaving and her nights undoing her handiwork.

Yancey is at once both male and female, Anglo and Indian, defender and despoiler of the land and its people. All cultures, genders, races, and ethnicities can be found within him. He represents the integration of all the different peoples who have helped settle and build the United States, combining their finest values and some of their basest weaknesses. He is large. He contains multitudes. If forced to conform to the constraints of present-day sociological determinism and read exclusively as person of fixed identity, we deny Yancey his full place in both Ferber’s text and the American myth. At his best—and he is often at his best—Yancey is an idealized American, open to the possibilities of the frontier, committed to the defense of the underdog, and willing to resist authority when he feels it is unfair or unjust.

Sabra, on the other hand, is not so much a romantic character as she is the pragmatic builder of cities, cultures, and civilizations. Yancey’s greatest contribution to their marriage and the future of the Oklahoma territory are his actions in helping his wife overcome her deeply-held prejudices and narrow-minded, conventional opinions, thus enabling her to develop into a mature and fair-minded woman and civic leader. If her disciplined pragmatism can be successfully combined with her husband’s idealism, together they can help develop a strong, progressive type of American that embraces all potentialities and is at the same time idealistic and realistic.
If, as Ferber implies, the marriage of Yancey and Sabra represents the union of two unique and original American types, the marriage of their son Cim to the daughter of an Osage chief represents the best hope for a truly multicultural America. As Yancey says to Sabra: “This is Oklahoma. In a way it’s what I wanted it to be when I came here twenty years ago…Cim’s like your father…Weak stuff, but good stock. Ruby’s pure Indian blood and a magnificent animal…their children and their grandchildren are going to be such stuff as Americans are made of” (290). Nevertheless, Ferber remains true to her approach and points out the potential weakness of this vision. The Cravats’ daughter Donna “seemed indeed to be a granddaughter after Felice Venable’s own heart” (264) and is determined “to marry the richest man in Oklahoma, and build a palace that I’ll hardly ever live in, and travel like royalty, and clank with emeralds” (266). She has no interest in anything other than her “indomitable materialism” (137). The reader hopes that Yancey’s vision will be realized; nevertheless, Ferber makes it clear America’s future direction is not guaranteed.

Throughout the novel, Ferber expresses compassion for characters whose ethnic background or economic status situates them outside normative American society; even The Kid is treated with understanding. Significantly, she treats her protagonists with an equal amount of critique and compassion. *Cimarron*’s popular success speaks to the willingness of her readers to revisit their own prejudices and identify with the struggles of an Isaiah, a Native American, and a Sol Levy.

*Cimarron* begins in the 1880s with an extended portrait of a “vitiated family” (27) that refuses to let go of the past. It ends some forty years later in an oil field that symbolizes the American future. It is a future in which the United States will ruthlessly
exploit its people and natural resources, but also create the most forward-looking and
dynamic society of the twentieth century. Ferber’s intent is not to resolve the central
question she is raising—how the United States can successfully incorporate its diverse
ethnicities, races, religions, and social classes into a unified nation that provides liberty
and justice for all. Instead, she argues the world in which she and her readers are living,
considering many different approaches and possible outcomes. The question of how to
best create an equitable multicultural society is as relevant today as it was when
Cimarron was first published and America’s problems involving the integration and
assimilation of all its people continue to resist simple solution. But, as Sol Levy might
put it, if we are not required to complete the work, neither are we permitted to refrain
from it.
CHAPTER 2

“GERMANY, MY MOTHER. AMERICA, MY BRIDE”: FANNIE HURST AND THE REPRESENTATION OF GERMAN-AMERICAN CULTURE

Fannie Hurst is often identified with her narratives about the lives of struggling Jewish immigrants on Manhattan’s Lower East Side and the tensions they experience as their children assimilate into the American way of life. Her familiarity with the people who live in New York City’s different neighborhoods might lead many readers to assume she was a native New Yorker. In fact, although she lived in Manhattan for many years, Hurst grew up in St. Louis, which was home to so many people of German descent that it was considered part of the so-called “sauerkraut belt” or the “German triangle” that also included Cincinnati and Milwaukee.

Hurst was the daughter of parents of German-Jewish background. In light of our own era’s emphasis on ethnicity and diversity, it is surprising that the influence of the midwestern German-American world of her youth on her work has not yet received critical attention. My objective in this chapter is to illustrate how Hurst represents the complex history of German-American culture and society in fiction published or taking place before or during World War I. In contrast to her straightforward representation of race relations in Imitation of Life, Hurst’s presentation of German-American culture ranges from nuanced (“A Boob Spelled Backward”) to angry and outraged (Lummox) to nostalgic (Back Street). It is important to keep in mind that although post-war readers knew the outcome of the war, characters in her fiction set during the years leading up to and through World War I (as well as readers of stories published before 1918) would not have known how the war would end. Unlike present-day readers, however, World War I-
era readers would have been aware of the intense anti-German sentiment that emerged during these years and that led to the almost-total eradication of German-American culture. In light of our own era’s increasingly excessive and intolerant nativism, Hurst’s descriptions of a world that vanished long ago have important implications for contemporary American society.

“Munich-on-the-Ohio”

Although Germany did not become a unified country until 1870, there has always been a sense of German identity based on shared language and culture. The earliest German-speaking immigrants came to the new world during the 1600s and began to arrive in force during the nineteenth century. More than five million emigrated between 1820 and 1890. Many were skilled workers and experienced tradespeople who settled in German-speaking communities in America’s midwestern agricultural and industrial heartland. For example, although in 1830 only five percent of Cincinnati’s population was of German background, within ten years some thirty percent of the city’s residents were born in Germany and that number doubled by 1850. In St. Louis, where Hurst grew up, the German-American population tripled during the decade between 1830 and 1840 alone. The Midwest soon took on a distinctly German personality as new immigrants organized German-language cultural and mutual-aid societies, schools, newspapers, houses of worship, cemeteries, hospitals, restaurants, and social organizations. In Cincinnati during the 1850s, for example, “the German language was used in four newspapers, in all church school classes, for sermons at church, and in transactions at banks and stores” (Cincinnati: A City of Immigrants). By 1900,
approximately eight million Americans out of a total population of seventy-six million claimed German ancestry (Kirschbaum 25).

Most of these immigrants came to the new world for political and economic opportunity. Mark M. Anderson writes that “[f]rustrated in their native territories by censorship, antiquated economic policies and repressive political orders, the Germans and German-speaking Jews who came to this country from 1830 to 1870 were often committed democrats and enterprising businessmen with a solid education who quickly became staunch advocates of liberal American values” (“Tracing the Legacy”). Hasia Diner refutes the stereotype that all German-Jewish immigrants were well-educated and wealthy, noting that many were middle- or working-class and that “in just about every Jewish community of this period, the vast majority of families made a livelihood in small business, especially clothing and the closely related field of dry-goods” (“Gathering” 25).

In addition, young Jewish men had a unique reason to emigrate; as Howard Sacher explains, in order to marry, they “had to prove [they were] engaged in a ‘respectable’ trade or profession, and large numbers of young Jews were ‘unrespectable’ peddlers or cattle dealers. Facing an endless bachelorhood, then, many preferred to try their fortunes abroad” (History of Jews in America, qtd. My Jewish Learning).

Hurst was born in 1885 into the small Jewish community in her mother’s hometown of Hamilton, Ohio. Nearby Cincinnati was home to a long-established German-Jewish community that exercised great influence on the emerging American-Jewish Reform movement. When Hurst was still a young girl, her family moved to St. Louis, another Midwestern city with a strong German-American identity. Hurst’s parents took pride in their German heritage, especially the high culture of Beethoven, Goethe,
and Schiller. They did not deny their Jewish roots, but neither did they actively practice their religion and looked down on their newly-arrived co-religionists from Eastern Europe, whom they considered less cultured and less refined. Although Hurst would later become well-known for her short stories about Jewish families, she acknowledges in her autobiography that “[i]n our middle-western world of assimilated German Jews, and comparatively few of them, this race consciousness had been slow to awaken and then only languidly” (Anatomy 18).

In the opening chapters of Back Street, Hurst describes both the vibrant German-American world of late-nineteenth century Cincinnati and the profound differences between its Christian and Jewish communities. The world of German-American Christians is one of hard-working “sauerkraut eaters” who live and work in the city nicknamed “Munich-on-the-Ohio” (12). This community is made up of “sturdy, unstylish women with enormous busts” and their “solid, thrifty” husbands “for whom the “Turnverein and Sangverein, the right lager, the virtuous wife, the virgin daughter, the respecting son, the well-tended business, were universe” (14). These members of “Cincinnati’s High German, solid-as-Gibraltar citizenry” and their large families dine regularly in the “beer-scented security” of restaurants such as Wielert’s (tellingly located in the “Over-the-Rhine” district), enjoying Schmierkase, Schnittlauch, and Bratwurst while listening to “the heavy harmonies of a full reed band, playing Wagner, Beethoven, ‘Ach, du lieber Augustin,’ ‘The Boat Is Coming Around the Bend, Good-By My Lover, Good-By’… while a man in short pants, with braid running down the side seams, knee-shy stockings, and a small green hat with a brush in it, yodeled…” (14). The novel centers around the life of Ray Schmidt, whose father Adolph spends his evenings sitting
at the family’s dining room table “reading the Volksblatt through two pairs of spectacles” (20) and urging his daughter to “Naschen ein Bischen!” (lit. “have a little nosh!”) as he serves her a “sliver” cut from the “hard heel of the cheese…on a slab of the richly dark loaf of pumpernickel that stood end-up on the table” (25).

A young woman of German-Lutheran descent, Ray is pretty, pert, and popular, especially with the traveling salesmen who call on her father’s business. One of her admirers refers to her as “this gemütlich [lit. pleasant and cheerful] girl” (11). However, Ray only appears sexy, or, in the slang of the era, “fly.” In fact, she is a virgin who lives at home with her father, stepmother, and stepsister, sews all her own clothes, and works in her father’s “Trimmings, Veilings, Dress Linings, and Buckram” store (9). Ray likes the men she dates well enough, but “[t]he best part of it all” is not how she responds to their kisses, but “the fact that the boys wanted to kiss you and got pleasure” (8).

*Back Street* is primarily concerned with Ray’s long-term affair with Walter Saxel, a Jewish banker she meets when he is still a young man living with his mother in Hamilton and courting a wealthy Jewish girl from Cincinnati. Ray and Walter are immediately attracted to each other but Ray recognizes that marriage is not a possibility because of their religious difference:

> Intermarriages were a risk. Just as easy for a man to make up his mind to fall in love with the right girl as with the wrong. On the other hand, why should anybody not born a Jew elect to be a Jew? People born Jews turned Gentile, but who ever heard of a Gentile turning Jew?…Madness of her to have even attempted to tinker at the gate of this mammoth tower of race. (101)
The German-Christian community in which Ray grows up is described in terms of abundant meals, large families, and lusty music. The German-Jewish community, on the other hand, is described in terms of high expectations for its young men, who are expected to excel in business, marry a girl from an appropriate family, and be loving husbands, doting fathers, and generous donors to communal and philanthropic causes. Nevertheless, when Ray and Walter independently move to Manhattan and encounter each other again, they begin an intense love affair. Walter is now a successful banker and well-regarded philanthropist. He is married to the young Jewish woman from Cincinnati and the father of several children. At Walter’s request, Ray gives up her career and outside friendships and interests in order to be available to him at his convenience. Walter performs in the expected manner in his public and family life, but only when he is with Ray does he relax and let his natural personality come through. Many years later, Ray follows Walter and his family to France and is left emotionally and financially bereft when he dies unexpectedly. The rest of the narrative details her slow decline and eventual death from starvation.

Although almost half the novel takes place during and after World War I, Hurst makes only a few allusions to the conflict and no reference to the intense anti-German feelings that developed in the United States during the war years, a reflection of Ray and Walter’s total absorption in their “back-street” affair. Indeed, the war seemingly takes place only to help underscore Walter’s increasing political and philanthropic engagement. His sons do not seem concerned about being drafted, nor do they express any idealism about serving their country by enlisting. After an extended overseas business trip, Walter offhandedly mentions that he returned home on a ship named the
Lusitania. Although this reference would still have resonated with readers when the novel was published, Hurst makes no further reference to the ocean liner whose sinking by the Germans in 1915 inflamed Americans and contributed to President Woodrow Wilson’s decision to enter the war on the side of the Triple Alliance of Great Britain, France, and Russia. Hurst does comment that “even before the World War, the low cost of living that had marked the turn of the century was a thing of the past” (226), but this observation is in reference to Walter’s lack of financial generosity toward Ray, not a comment on changing times. As in all things, Walter’s public service and philanthropic activities are motivated by self-interest. The role he plays “against the background of economics, diplomacy, philanthropy, and ultimately the war” (232) is a responsibility required by the investment firm of which he is a partner, not motivated by his principles.

Other than these few allusions, Hurst does not discuss the impact of World War I on either Europe or the American home front. The German-American community so lovingly portrayed in the early chapters simply disappears from the text. In addition, although the novel ends in France during the 1920s, there is no sense of the storm clouds again beginning to form in Europe. In one sense, this absence underscores the fact that the outer world is no longer relevant to the narrative of Walter and Ray’s love affair, now speeding toward its inevitable tragic ending. In addition, the disappearance of any reference to German-American culture from the narrative reflects the disappearance of German culture from American life during these years. The “beer-scented security” of the unique German-American vernacular culture fell victim to the type of xenophobia couched as “patriotism” that exploded during and after the war years. High German culture also came under attack, as leading American orchestras
fired conductors born in Germany and refused to play the the works of “enemy” composers such as Beethoven. Books by Goethe and Schiller were removed from the shelves of public libraries and either hidden in basement storage or publicly burned. Few people seemed to be aware of the irony of the fact that Beethoven, Goethe, and Schiller were all long-dead before the war broke out.

“Germany, My Mother. America, My Bride”

Just as she was slow to recognize the influence of her Jewish background on her life, Hurst also was slow to recognize the war’s importance. She writes in her autobiography: “We are in the first world war. One of the great holocausts of all time tore out of what to me seemed to be the blue, changing the shape of my world and yet, in the beginning, scarcely touching me personally or bestirring me to realizations. But gradually…” (Anatomy 175). Anatomy of Me was published in 1958 and Hurst’s use of the word “holocaust” in this context connects the extraordinary devastation caused by World War I to the horror that would again engulf Europe during the nineteen-thirties and -forties.

The war between the Triple Alliance and the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary broke out in 1914. The United States first maintained a policy of neutrality reflecting George Washington’s advice that the nation should “steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world” and avoid entangling “our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rival-ship, interest, humor, or caprice” (“Farewell Address” 27). Woodrow Wilson, the wartime president, worked hard to keep the United Status “studiously neutral” (Reynolds 20). According to the historian
David Reynolds, Wilson “considered neutrality vital because ‘the people of the United States are drawn from many nations, and chiefly from the nations now at war’” (qtd. Reynolds 20). In spite of Wilson’s best efforts, however, ethnic loyalties made it inevitable that there would be pressure on the United States to take part in the war. Americans of Anglo-Saxon descent urged the government to enter the conflict on the side of the Triple Alliance. Most German-Americans encouraged neutrality but fought a losing battle as a series of events repulsed and enraged the American public. The Central Powers’ brutal treatment of neutral Belgium, popularly known as “the rape of Belgium,” and a series of domestic acts of sabotage on American soil by German agents and a few German-Americans triggered intense anti-German feeling in the United States. The sinking of the Lusitania on May 7, 1915 resulted in the deaths of almost two thousand people, including more than a hundred Americans, and further intensified antipathy toward Germany. The United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917. By the time the armistice was signed on November 11, 1918, more than nine million soldiers—including almost 117,000 Americans—and seven million civilians had died.

Americans fought the war on the home front as well as on the battlefields. Most domestic efforts were well-intended and supportive but not every home-front effort was benign. One questionable home-front battle involved the federal government’s attempt to control popular attitudes by restricting expression of opposing opinions. According to Celia M. Kingsbury, this gave rise to “the first massive organized propaganda campaign of the twentieth century, the first deliberate and official effort to manipulate public opinion, an effort that was largely successful, according to wartime statistics” (6).
Shortly after the United States entered the war, the federal government formed the Committee on Public Information (also known as the Creel Committee), which was intended to promote public support for the war effort. The committee made extensive use of mass-media techniques, such as public speeches, newsreels, posters, photos, magazine and newspaper articles, and billboards to communicate pro-Triple Alliance and anti-German messages.

Censorship of popular culture, both official and self-imposed, soon became the norm. According to Scott D. Emmert and Steven Trout, “[a]lmost immediately after the declaration of war in April 1917, the U.S. government would do all that it could to suppress troubling, morally inconclusive war stories…A work of literature deemed seditious could land its author—and publisher—in a federal penitentiary” (6). Spurred on by nativist fervor, the federal government passed the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918, which “made it illegal to say or write anything that might even indirectly or remotely be seen as obstructing the war effort” (Kirschbaum 140). Incidents of tar-and-feathering of German-Americans were reported in at least thirteen states. German aliens living in the United States were barred from “Washington, D.C., the Panama Canal Zone, from all boats except public ferries, and from all airships, balloons, and airplanes” and thousands of resident aliens, together with a number of German-American community leaders, were sent to internment camps (Kirschbaum 146). The rest of the approximately 600,000 German aliens living in the United States had to register with local police and were forbidden to relocate within the country. It is not surprising that many German-Americans found it advisable to eliminate any trace of German culture from their lives. Nor is it surprising that a writer such as Hurst, who
depended on mass-market magazines and leading publishers to reach a large, loyal
readership, did not speak out directly about controversial issues during the war years.

This does not mean that Hurst did not continue to use her fiction argue her world.
Although she admits that the war did not at first affect her personally, it soon emerges
as a plot element in her short stories. The United States entered the war in April 1917,
and according to Brooke Kroeger, by June “the war motif had infiltrated” her writing:

Now the mistress has a gruff, predatory arms dealer for a lover; now the
Hollywood filmmaker lucks into saving his daughter from a heartless gold
digger’s wedding band when the scoundrel happens to sail off to Europe on the
Lusitania; now a long-suffering woman can slip her boyfriend out of the tenacious
clutch of his widowed mother by convincing him to enlist. (50)

Hurst does not write about the battles and brutalities of war. Instead, she focuses
on “the myriad and sometimes tangential ways the conflict had affected civilian lives”
(Kroeger 52). Indeed, the war is so tangential in some of her earliest war-related short
stories as to seem almost irrelevant. In time, however, as “food shortages, food
controls, [and] casualty lists became the order of the day” (Anatomy 175), she begins to
present war-related issues more seriously. Looking back with hindsight, we can
recognize that in some of her fiction Hurst is imaginatively trying to represent what it
must have been like for Americans of German descent during these years. A contrast
between her short story “Sieve of Fulfillment” and “A Boob Spelled Backward” reflects
her growing awareness of the impact of the war while at the same time underscorings the
restrictions and censorship that affected direct commentary.
“Sieve of Fulfillment” was published in Cosmopolitan magazine in October 1917, six months after the United States entered the war. It is the story of Millie Ross, an upper-middle class Manhattanite who scrimps and saves to help her husband through difficult economic times and ensure that their son Edwin can attend college. Millie’s loyalty and industry do not pay off; when her husband becomes successful and wealthy, he quickly throws her over for a showgirl. She feels deserted for a second time when Edwin tells her he has volunteered for a military unit at his university and will soon be shipping out to France. Just as she begged her husband not to divorce her, Mille begs her son, “Don’t leave me, Edwin! Baby darling, don’t leave me! I’m alone! I’m afraid!” In an expression of patriotism that is at the same time both idealistic and naive, Edwin replies:

“Your son at the front, mother, helping to make the world a safer place for democracy. Does a little mother with something like that to bank on have time to be miserable over family rows? You’re going to knit while I’m gone. The busiest little mother a fellow ever had, doing her bit for her country! There’s signs up all over the girls’ campus: “A million soldiers ‘out there’ are needing wool jackets and chest-protectors. How many will you take care of?” You’re going to be the busiest little mother a fellow ever had. You’re going to stop making a fuss over me and begin to make a fuss over your country. We’re going into service, mother!” (“Sieve of Fulfillment”)

The story evolves into a strong statement of support for the home-front war effort. Knitting helps to take Millie’s mind off her personal situation and she gradually realizes
that she is supporting an important cause in her own small way. It ends with Millie so engrossed in her work that she forgets her own sorrows and stays up all night to knit:

Dawn broke upon her there, her hat still cockily awry, tears dried in a vitrified gleaming down her cheeks. Beneath her flying fingers, a sleeveless waistcoat was taking shape, a soldier’s inner jacket against the dam of trenches. At sunup it lay completed, spread out as if the first of a pile. The first noises of the city began to rise remotely. A bell pealed off somewhere. Day began to raise its conglomerate voice. On her knees beside the couch there, the second waistcoat was already taking shape beneath the cocksure needles. The old pinkly moist look had come out in her face. One million boys “out there” were needing chest-protectors! (“Sieve of Fulfillment”)

Abe Ravitz considers “Sieve of Fulfillment” one of Hurst’s narratives about “the forsaken woman in urban America” (68). In his reading, Millie learns to accept her abandonment by both husband and son by taking on responsibility for the care of others, which he identifies as “[a] luminous example of caritas”:

Her newly dedicated ‘flying fingers’ will knit for victory, her ‘cocksure needles’ guided by skillful, loving hands, Millie Ross will thus sublimate caritas, adopting as surrogates needy American soldiers who will appreciate the mothering instincts of a generous woman…Millie Ross has moved beyond the pain of abandonment and isolation to the satisfaction of social reengagement. (70-71)

There is another way to read this short story that I want to emphasize. Although Hurst uses the story of Millie Ross to reinforce the importance of home-front patriotism and active support of the war effort, neither Millie nor Edwin (nor, presumably, most of
Hurst’s readers) has any idea of what awaits him in Europe. The narrative’s very innocence undercuts the blind naiveté of the caritas that Ravitz praises. Edwin on the battlefield—and Hurst’s readers on the home front—will soon learn what war is really about. As the United States’ role in the war intensifies, some of Hurst’s fiction begins to describe the devastating impact of armed conflict on ordinary men and women, a risk she takes on in the face of wartime censorship and that thus requires considerable authorial subtlety.

“A Boob Spelled Backward” appeared in Cosmopolitan in April 1918. In contrast to the naiveté of “Sieve of Fulfillment,” which was published only six months earlier, its tone is gritty and realistic. The “boob,” or foolish young man, of the story, is Samuel Lipkind, a stereotypical “Nice Jewish Boy” who is torn between his ambitious girlfriend’s insistence that he enlist and his mother’s resistance to his joining the army. On the surface, “A Boob Spelled Backward” is a conventional story about two strong-minded women competing for the love of a weak young man. Such a reading, however, overlooks two important sub-themes. The first involves Hurst’s presentation of the internal conflict of immigrants torn between love for their motherland and love for their adopted country. The conflict between mother and girlfriend thus extends beyond the immediate characters and reflects a widespread emotion summed up in the popular German-American expression, “Deutschland meine Mutter, Amerika meine Frau” (lit. “Germany my mother, America my bride”). The second important sub-theme involves the meaning of Sam’s rejection of his materialistic girlfriend in favor a true patriotism expressed in terms of bravery, independence, and pragmatism.
Sam is a thirty-year-old, “five-foot-five, slightly bald, and ever so rotund” bachelor (120). He shares an apartment in Upper Manhattan with his widowed mother, who is adamantly opposed to her son’s joining the army. Clara Bloom, his long-time girlfriend, is a modern, independent young woman who has developed a successful retailing career and “work[ed] herself up to head floor-lady in wholesale ribbons and forty dollars a week” (118). Clara is tired of waiting for Sam to propose and anxious to receive his benefits as a war widow if “God forbid!—anything should happen to you” (127). She issues an ultimatum: either Sam enlists and they marry and move to a military base far from Manhattan—and his mother—or she is leaving to marry a soldier who is stationed in Boston.

Clara admonishes her boyfriend: “Don’t be a boob coming and going, Sam; you’re one now not to see things and you’ll be another one spelled backward if you don’t help yourself to your chance when it comes” (128). Mrs. Lipkind faints when Sam tells her that he plans to enlist. By the next morning, however, she has changed her mind and says she supports her son’s decision. In a conveniently melodramatic twist, she proceeds to die almost immediately. Surprisingly, Sam does not call Clara to propose. Instead, he sits alone in his mother’s bedroom, glancing “automatically out to the wall telephone in the hall opposite the open door. But he did not move” (135). Clara disappears from the narrative, presumably leaving for Boston and marriage to a man she does not love. The story ends with Lieutenant Sam Lipkind “[a]t a training-camp—somewhere” (136), awakened each morning by a bugler playing “Reveille” instead of by his mother’s loving kisses.
Summarized in this way, “A Boob Spelled Backward” can easily be dismissed as a stereotypical story about a grown man infantilized by his mother’s controlling behavior. Ravitz suggests that it is a typical Yiddishe Mama narrative and writes that “Sam…becomes a ‘boob’ twice, entangled helplessly at length by the pressures of both eros and caritas” (52). I suggest instead that Hurst is arguing that Americans must not forget that there are human beings on both sides of the conflict, an argument she subtly introduces in resistance to the Creel Commission censors. On first reading, for example, the cadence of Mrs. Lipkind’s speech suggests that she is a Yiddish-speaking immigrant from Eastern Europe: “All I ask is my son should never have it worse than to eat all his lifetime in just such a kitchen like mine. Off my kitchen floor I would rather eat than off some people’s fine polished mahogany” (114). Similarly, her resistance to her son’s volunteering for military service initially seems to be nothing more than a mother’s natural desire to protect her son:

“A few more fried potatoes…Sammy?”

“Whoa! You want to feed me up for the fat boys’ regiment!”

Mrs. Lipkind glanced quickly away, her profile seeming to quiver. “Don’t use that word, Sam—even in fun—it’s a knife in me.”

“What word?”

“Regiment.” (115)

It soon becomes evident, however, that Mrs. Lipkind’s reluctance for her son to enlist is more than a mother’s natural desire to keep her son out of danger. The Lipkinds are not, in fact, Eastern-European Jews; they are immigrants from Germany. The war is thus a particularly sensitive issue; as Sam tells Clara, “[t]he war hasn’t been mentioned
in our house for two years—except that the letters don’t come from Germany, and that’s a grief to her” (127). Mrs. Lipkind’s real fear is not only that Sam will be injured—or worse—but also that he will be forced to fight against their relatives:

"Your own blood, Sammy! Your own baby cousins what I tucked you in bed with—mine own sister’s children! Her babies what slept with you…I’m a good American, Sammy; I got so much I should be thankful for to America. Twenty-five years it’s my home, the home where I had prosperity and good treatment, the home where I had happiness with your papa and where he lies buried, but I can’t give you to fight against my own, Sammy—to be murdered by your own—my sister what never in her life harmed a bird—my child and her children—cousins—against each other. My beautiful country what I remember with cows and green fields and clover…It ain’t human to murder against your own flesh and blood for God knows what reason!” (132)

The conflict between love of mother and love of girlfriend thus not only represents a family triangle but also the existential conflict experienced by all immigrants who continue to have deep feeling for their motherland while still loving their adopted country. Indeed, the concern that their sons would commit “murder against your own flesh and blood for God knows what reason!” (132) was so strong during these years that some German-American draftees committed suicide in training camps to avoid being sent overseas to fight against their relatives (Kirschaum 128).

Nevertheless, Hurst concludes that duty to country supersedes even duty to family. Mrs. Lipkind articulates this when she tells her son that she has changed her mind about his joining the army:
"I—been a bad old woman…I got a brave boy for a son, and I want to make him a coward…From America what has given to me everything I should hold back my son from fighting for. In war, it ain’t your own flesh and blood what counts; it’s the flesh and blood of your country—not, Sam? I been thinking only it’s a family affair. If God lets be such a terrible thing like war, there is somewhere a good reason for it."  (134-135)

In Hurst’s war narrative, the Lipkinds demonstrate loyalty to America, their chosen “bride,” over Germany, their “mother.” When Mrs. Lipkind dies, Sam’s connection to Germany is severed. His subsequent rejection of Clara, who is so eager to receive his military benefits—if “God forbid!—anything should happen to you”—is a rejection of American materialism. Clara is typical of Hurst’s young women who must provide for themselves, but she carries her self-absorption to an extreme: “If I’d been able to save a cent, it might be different. But I haven’t—I’m that way. I make big and spend big” (123). When Sam fails to telephone her after his mother’s death, he rejects Clara’s “seventy-five dollar suit…and twelve-dollar shoes” (125) and chooses instead the “bride” of idealism and pragmatism that represents the best of America.

Sam is short and chubby, but, as Susan Koppelman points out, Hurst’s ideal man is not necessary tall and muscular. Instead, “[h]e is a real mensch. His looks are irrelevant to his value and to his worthiness of being loved” (Stories, “Introduction xxii). At the end of the story, Sam is no longer an immature “boob.” Hurst’s message is two-fold: first, for a man to become an adult, he must move beyond dependency on others and take responsibility for his own life. And in the same way, German-Americans, whether Jewish or gentile, must move beyond love of their motherland and accept adult
responsibility toward their adopted country, the America that is their chosen bride. For all his greater professional and financial success, Back Street’s Walter Saxel never achieves emotional independence. Sam Lipkind is an unlikely hero, but he is a hero nonetheless.

“The Eager, Hating Girls”

There are no clear-cut enemies in Hurst’s war-era short stories. There is anxiety, as seen in the mothers who worry about the safety of their sons serving overseas. There is intolerance, personified by co-workers who mock an effeminate colleague who feels he is “darn lucky to even measure up to Uncle Sam’s idea of a soldier” (“She Also Serves” 139). There is emotional cruelty, such as that expressed by Millie Ross’s son when he fails to understand the reasons for his mother’s despair at his enlistment. And there is the recognition that the true enemy is autocracy, not individuals, as when the mother in “Humoresque” (1919) says that “[w]e’ve got a fight with no one!” and her daughter replies: “We have got a fight with some one! With autocracy! Only this time it happens to be Hunnish autocracy” (164). But there is no reference to the anti-German propaganda Americans were relentlessly exposed to during the war years, such as posters and newsreels depicting the average German as a savage killer and that led to numerous acts of physical violence against German Americans. Five years after the war ended, however, Hurst expresses profound anger about such destructive home-front nativism in Lummox.

Lummox is Hurst’s only modernist text and her personal favorite among her many narratives. The “Oessetrich” episode takes place in Manhattan during the war
years. Bertha, the novel’s protagonist, is a live-in cook and domestic worker in the home of a well-off German-American family. Mathilde Oessetrich, the matriarch, is strong-willed, stubborn, and totally unaware that her need to control her daughters' lives is destroying her children; her lack of self-awareness is reflected in the association of her surname with the head-in-the-sand image of an ostrich. Paula, the oldest of her three daughters, is “the meekest under it, probably because it had defeated her first” (199). She finds relief in music, hiding in a “large, fourth-floor-front room” in which “[t]here was a grand piano…For hours, sometimes for days at a time, Paula would disappear into this retreat, the incense of her tender, lovely, ruminating music stealing out through the crack under the door” (199). Ermangarde, the middle daughter, is “nineteen, thickly built, but with a square kind of Teutonic prettiness” (201). She too is overwhelmed by her mother, and “nervous with it” (199). Paula and Ermangarde have been disappointed in love and further disappointed by their mother’s obliviousness to their unhappiness. Only Olga, the youngest daughter, has had any success in separating from her family. She “attended a school for social research and wore her hair short in the days when it was referred to as ‘docked,’ lived away from the strain of it in a studio on East Seventeenth Street” (199). But, as Ermangarde says to her mother, “We are none of us happy girls” (214).

The Oessetrichs take pride in what they regard as their sophisticated cultural values. Ermangarde takes voice lessons and argues with her mother about the value of modernist poetry. Paula’s piano repertoire includes Schubert, Liszt, Chopin, Debussy, and “Beethoven. Brahms. More Beethoven” (238). Olga keeps busy with charitable
projects, including many war-related home-front activities and ultimately leaves for Europe to volunteer with the American Expeditionary Forces.

Olga is an idealistic young woman, but there is nothing idealistic about Hurst’s description of the young soldiers in their khaki uniforms who march with their regiments through the streets of Manhattan: “Sometimes they passed the house…Tramp. Tramp. Tramp-tramp-tramp. It was a horrible rhythm. The willy-nilly young men, steaming up hate” (244):

Olga was in khaki too…It made her busy and important, all the hating. She drove a small khaki-colored ambulance around town. Everywhere. She was very earnest.

The world safe for democracy. The little women without sons began to hustle so. The sudden splendidness of making the world safe for democracy. (245)

This is a far cry from Mrs. Lipkind’s fear that her son will kill his relatives: “Your own blood, Sammy! Your own baby cousins what I tucked you in bed with—mine own sister’s children!” (“Boob” 132) The operative word here is “hating”:

Olga! Life spun for her those war months and for the little group of drab-clad girls who came to help on canteen days. The eager, hating girls. It was thrilling to hate! Thrilling to feed these wide-faced, clean-faced boys the catnip. It made them heroic and gay and debonair and careless, and full of a very fine fervor for fighting that foe unknown and that foe unseen. It made the fine, high-sounding war phrases shine. It was easier somehow to hate, and to want to fight, with all of
the machinery for making the world safe for democracy so busily in motion. (250-251)

Olga increasingly confuses patriotism with prejudice. When she insists that the family remove a portrait of Beethoven that hangs in the dining room, Paula counters that every war is different, but “Beethoven is eternal” and asks “[w]hat has Beethoven to do with this horrible fighting...Art transcends war. Art is the language of God and war is the barking of men. Beethoven is bigger than war” (246). At first, Olga dismisses her sister as “stupid and sentimental.” Later, however, she accuses her of being a traitor to her country and making “dangerous, disloyal utterances” (247). The family collapses when the idealistic Paula goes mad and is committed to a mental institution and Ermangarde breaks social norms and runs off with a married man. It is clear, however, that Hurst considers Olga the most dangerous of the sisters, neither mad nor immoral, but something worse, one of “[t]he eager, hating girls” for whom “[i]t was thrilling to hate” (250).

Carol Batker cites a 1924 review of Lummox in the Jewish Daily Forward that describes the scene in which Olga calls Paula a traitor as a “picture of a German home in wartime, trying to outdo the American ‘patriots’ in ‘patriotism’ by even taking down the picture of Beethoven” (qtd. Batker 125). But as Kirschbaum points out, such anti-German activity was not only the work of German-Americans eager to demonstrate their loyalty to the United States. The entire home front was characterized by increasing anti-German hysteria. Hurst’s emphasis in the “Oessetrich” episode thus takes on a special significance. She is not describing the conflicted emotions of loving mothers, or pride in acceptance into the military, or resistance to autocratic authority. She is warning about
the danger of excessive patriotism to the moral underpinnings of American society and suggesting that the emotionally vulnerable Paula will not be the only person destroyed by the out-of-control nativists who seek to dominate the national conversation.

This change in emphasis does not negate the importance of Hurst’s earlier arguments; there are positive examples of patriotism in *Lummox* as well. For example, although Bertha is the poorest of the poor, she buys a War Bond out of her meager savings. Although Hurst does not deny the importance of supporting the troops, she places her emphasis on rebuilding the world on universalist principles rather than narrow national interests. In Hurst’s view, it is music—including German music—that signifies a universalism that can join all humankind in perpetual peace. As Paula argues:

I loathe all this blind rushing pell-mell into a struggle arranged by the mighty minority and paid for with the lives of young men who are drugged on trumped-up ideals. I loathe war which destroys the internationalism of art for the puny nationalism of men. The maimed bodies aren’t the worst. That’s the easy way to hate war. The safe way. I—hate it just as much for the maimed souls that stay at home—to whom the noise of military brass bands is louder than the music of Beethoven. (246-247)

This is a beautiful sentiment, but we must not forget that it is the idealistic Paula who goes mad. Hurst recognizes that idealism alone cannot save art, culture, and human decency from the self-proclaimed patriots, those “maimed souls that stay at home—to whom the noise of military brass bands is louder than the music of Beethoven.” Hurst is not providing a solution; she is presenting a warning about the
danger of scapegoating ethnic, religious, or racial groups to build national solidarity. Beethoven and other German composers would eventually find their way back into the American repertoire, but by 1923 it was already too late to save German-American culture and community, which “was by and large wiped out by the end of World War I” (Kirschbaum 150). By the time Back Street was published only eight years later, the Midwestern German-American communities of the late nineteenth century that Hurst so lovingly describes were at best a fading memory.

“A Boob Spelled Backward,” Lummox, and Back Street are very different narratives. Taken together, however, they present a strong argument about the dangers of an uncritical nativism that undercuts the very moral purpose the country was fighting for. “A Boob Spelled Backward” reminds readers that people on both sides of a conflict are decent human beings who are worthy of empathy. The “Oessetrich” episode in Lummox speaks to the ability of art and music to create a universal connection that links people together in spite of the way hostile governments try to separate them. Most subtle, but perhaps most significant of all, Back Street reminds the reader of what is lost when excessive nativism and prejudice masquerading as “patriotism” destroys an entire ethnic community and leaves virtually no record of its unique contributions.

Back Street was the last of the narratives considered here to be written. Although it contains no foreshadowing of the horror that would soon envelop Western Europe, Hurst would undoubtedly have supported America’s role in fighting against the Nazi madness. I believe, however, that she would have continued to warn against a nativism that finds expression in ethnic, racial, and religious prejudice and thus threatens to destroy the country from within. Just as Germany’s post-World War II efforts to atone for
its past and assume principled global leadership is an example of how a nation can successfully rebuild and reclaim a moral position, the destruction of German-American culture in the United States during and immediately after World War I provides an important case study of the dangers of xenophobia. Tellingly, Kirschbaum ends *Burning Beethoven* with a comparison between the “convulsions of anti-German sentiment that swept the country” during the war years (149) and the intense anti-Islamic attitudes prevalent today among some sectors of the American population. It is interesting to think about how Fannie Hurst might have handled this present-day issue in a narrative that balanced the necessary struggle against Islamic terrorism with nativist attitudes that call for the destruction of an entire culture. Perhaps she would set her narrative in lower Manhattan on the “West Street of the water pipe and fez. Hot disturbed breaths of alien climes, not soluble one in another, but all soluble in the new world. And out of the new world was one day to come the rich composite expression that struggled so for articulation” (*Lummox* 107). And undoubtedly, she would conclude: “Wars change. Beethoven is eternal” (*Lummox* 246).
Abe Ravitz writes that Fannie Hurst “would frequently emphasize the girl who is hungry” (36). This certainly applies to Bertha, the protagonist of Hurst’s 1923 novel *Lummox*. Bertha is a passive, inarticulate, heavy-set woman without family or financial resources to fall back on. She earns her living as a cook and domestic worker but is reduced to infrequent daily work as she ages and loses physical strength. This means she can afford at most one meal a day and soon begins to feel “the knife blades of hunger… slashing” (313). But *Lummox*, Hurst’s only modernist text, is unique among her work in many respects and it is perhaps more accurate to say that Hurst frequently emphasizes the girl who has eaten today but knows all too well that she is only one meal away from hunger.

Hurst’s early fiction reflects a deep concern with several interconnected issues involving women, food insecurity, and body image. Considered individually, each text is a compelling narrative about people dealing with different life crises; taken together, they articulate the author’s impassioned call for social justice and the acceptance of people of racial, economic, and physical differences. Hurst often uses images of food and body to signify her characters’ anxieties and concerns about a variety of issues, including money (or its absence), food insecurity, the impact of aging on employment, racial injustice, and the tensions between immigrant parents and their Americanized children. In addition, she uses these images to illustrate her characters’ problems and
concerns about family conflicts and personal self-image. These forgotten narratives thus anticipate issues that have continued resonance in our own time.

Hurst herself had a complicated personal relationship with food and body image that is reflected in her 1935 *No Food with My Meals*. In this self-described “dieting memoir,” she acknowledges that her svelte body, “this slim human envelope…has been achieved at the cost of no food with my meals…”(1) and admits that through constant dieting, “I had lost pounds and my sense of humor” (34). She is particularly harsh in her description of “the slimmed, the irritable, the hungry woman [who] takes on the proportion of one of our minor menaces,” observing:

She does not add to the gaiety of the nation or the home; she is no healthier, she is prettier only according to the frail standards of a papier-mâché city on the west coast [i.e. Hollywood] where the human envelope is the stock in trade. She is a success chiefly to herself and her sister of similar standards. (51)

Although Hurst encourages her readers to break the cycle of self-hatred that leads to self-starvation, she acknowledges that she herself is “personally too infected with this slimming phobia to hope for complete redemption. I may come back, but probably not all the way” (52). Because Hurst is not generally a self-revelatory writer, recognizing this self-awareness of her personal anxieties about weight, compulsive dieting, and poor body image reinforces the importance she places on these images as vehicles for communicating critical issues to her readers.

Body image and food insecurity are not necessarily one and the same thing, but they are often implicated in one another. The working women in Hurst’s fiction use their bodies to earn their livings and when their bodies begin to fail, they face social isolation,
financial insecurity, and possible starvation. As Bertha ages, she loses the physical strength that once made her a desirable domestic worker and can no longer find steady work. Mae Monroe in “Sob Sister” (1916) uses her body in a different way. Mae is a kept woman and when her lover abandons her for a younger, slimmer woman, she too lacks financial resources to fall back on. She turns first to “an uncovered box of chocolate bon-bons” for solace and when food no longer comforts her, to suicide (92). The food that signifies Mayme and Charley’s poverty in “The Joy of Living” (1909)—the “curled, steaming slice” of frying ham and the “skillet of grease-saturated potatoes” (1)—becomes a symbol of hope and happiness when Charlie, a department-store clerk, tells his wife that he has been promoted to “the ribbons and laces” and Mayme “radiated her joy” as she “scraped the greasy potatoes into the serving dish and poured the coffee” (2).

In *Fleshing Out America: Race, Gender, and the Politics of the Body in American Literature, 1833-1879*, Carolyn Sorisio discusses the ways in which nineteenth century writers, including Harriet Jacobs, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Margaret Fuller, “struggled in a tumultuous period to flesh out America, to grapple, in other words, with the discourses of abolition, women’s rights, and science…” (2). Hurst also “flesh[s] out” her narratives by providing “strategies of resistance” for her characters (239). Unlike the writers Sorisio considers, however, Hurst does not call for a revolution to overcome “coercive systems of corporeal control” (239); her call is for the ordinary person to gain greater understanding and acceptance of the full range of diversity in the United States.

The broad range of issues Hurst considers reflects her broad engagement with the world around her. Here, I examine six of Hurst’s texts published between 1919 and
1935. I begin with a three texts in which Hurst calls for social justice and greater acceptance of diversity in American society: “Even As You and I” (1919), whose characters are men and women of unconventional body types; “The Gold in Fish” (1925), which incorporates discussions of food and body image into a story about immigrant families trying to assimilate into the American mainstream, and *Lummox* (1923), which is concerned with the food insecurity of the working poor. I next discuss her 1931 novel *Back Street*, in which a man’s control of food and money reflects his desire to control his mistress. I conclude with an analysis of the ways in which body image affects social outsider status based on race in Hurst’s best-remembered novel, *Imitation of Life* (1933).

“Even as You and I” is concerned with people whose bodies are so different from the norm that they can only find work as performers in circus sideshows. Luella “Teenie” Hoag, the story’s heroine, is an obese young woman who is the antithesis of the stereotypical 1920s hipless, boyish flapper. Together with other men and women of non-standard body types, she works as a performer in the cruelly-named “Coney Island Freak Palace.” Miss Hoag (a mean-spirited variant on “Hog”) is the show’s “fat lady,” who is “guarantee[d]…to tip the scales at five hundred and fifty-five, a weight unsurpassed by any of the heavyweights in the history of show business” (36). Hurst’s underlying argument is that Teennie is a complicated and worthwhile human being, not a mere sideshow attraction, and that “sunk there like a flower-seed planted too deeply to push its way up to bloom, the twenty-year old heart of Miss Hoag beat beneath its carbonaceous layer upon layer, even skipped a beat at spring’s palpitating sweetness, dared to dream of love, weep of desire, ache of loneliness and loveliness” (36).
The object of Teenie’s affection is Jas, known professionally as Jastrow the Granite Jaw, the sideshow’s glass eater. Jas is a free-loader who is more than content to live off a woman’s earnings. For all her romantic longings, however, Teenie is a practical young woman. She is aware that careers can falter and that she has to provide for her future. She has saved some money and because she associates the ability to grow her own food with the ability to take care of herself, is determined to put her savings into land: “There’s a farm out near Xenia, Ohio, where I lay up in the winter that I’m going to own for myself one of these days…I’m going to die in a little story-and-a-half frame house of my own…a potato-patch right up to my back steps, and my own white Leghorns crossin’ my own country road to get to the other side” (42). When Jas becomes desperately ill, Teenie brings him to the farm and unsuccessfully attempts to nourish him back to health. Through a complicated plot twist, his estranged wife turns up at his deathbed and somehow manages to claim Teenie’s money as her own. Although Teenie is financially ruined, the story ends on a relatively happy note. Teenie has “no tears in her eyes” (55). She has experienced love and, as she puts it, it is “[b]etter to have loved a short man/Than never to have loved atall” (55).

Susan Koppelman includes “Even As You and I” in her collection of short stories about women and weight, The Strange History of Suzanne LaFleshe and Other Stories of Women and Fatness. Part of Koppelman’s objective in this volume is to express what she describes as a growing awareness among overweight women that they are “oppressed women…joined in the creation of a social justice movement” (LaFleshe, “Introduction” xxiii). She considers Hurst’s narrative one that humanizes the grossly overweight and “assures readers that fat ladies suffer pangs and cherish hopes just like
other women, live in communities where people work for a living and struggle with imperfect working conditions, where there are friends, allies, companions—and undesirables, predators, leeches, and deceivers—just as there are in communities where ‘you and I’ live” (LaFleshe, “Afterword” 239).

Such a reading situates “Even As You and I” within the emerging discipline of Fat Studies, which Esther D. Rothblum describes as:

…a field of scholarship that critically examines societal attitudes about body weight and appearance, and that advocates equality for all people with respect to body size. Fat studies seeks to remove the negative associations that society has about fat and the fat body. It regards weight, like height, as a human characteristic that varies widely across any population. (J. Fat Studies 1.1)

Marilyn Wann emphasizes that Fat Studies “offers no opposition to the simple fact of human weight diversity, but instead looks at what people and societies make of this reality” (“Invitation” x). In addition, “Even As You and I” can also be considered a call for society’s acceptance of the entire range of Americans, including those of different ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds, as well as different body types. Significantly, the short story was published shortly after World War I ended, when, as Koppelman points out, “anti-immigration exclusionary sentiments began to build” (LaFleshe, “Afterword” 239). Tellingly, many arguments about immigration are strikingly similar to those expressed today. Then, as now, universalists urged the United States to play a leadership role in international affairs, while nativists sought to make America great again by denying new immigrants a full role in American society. During the post-World War I years, nativists succeeded in passing a series of restrictive immigration laws
designed to ensure what they considered the “heterogeneity” of the United States by limiting the number of immigrants, particularly those who were neither Christian nor white. In this context, Teenie Hoag’s heartfelt cry—“Ain’t a big tent like me human?”—extends Hurst’s narrative beyond the immediate situation; through Teenie’s voice, Hurst urges her readers to encompass all people within the “big tent” that is the United States (44).

Hurst uses images of food and body in *Lummox* to highlight a different social issue. Her emphasis here is on the problems of the urban working poor and, in particular, the women who labor in for low wages in working conditions that are often squalid and unsafe and who, as a result, frequently suffer from food and housing insecurity. In spite of the many differences in situation and literary style between *Lummox* and “Even As You and I,” the two narratives share several important similarities. Among the most significant are Hurst’s emphasis on the importance of a woman’s ability to earn an independent living and her descriptions of the different ways in which women use their bodies to earn those livings.

Bertha, the desperately poor protagonist of *Lummox*, works as a live-in cook for a series of upper-middle-class Manhattanites. Her continued employment assures her of a place to sleep, food to eat, and a small salary. Helga, Bertha’s only friend, is tall, slim, and attractive and hates the drudgery of domestic labor. She decides to earn her living by using her body in a different way and turns to prostitution. Helga gives voice to Hurst’s call for justice for domestic workers, crying out: “All back doors and slop cans for some—front doors and canopies for others—no reason—just happening that way. God couldn’t mean it like that” (184). Later, she observes: “I’m like a kid sleeping on the floor.
I can't fall outta bed because there is no place to fall. See? That's me. I lose if I win. There's a helluva lot of fun in a game like that. I lose if I win" (221). Helga's cry echoes Teenie Hoag's words to the diminutive Baron, the "Little" in the sideshow in which they both work: "I'm human, Baron. Maybe you don't know it, but I'm human...I just wonder sometimes what God had in mind, anyways—making our kind. Where do we belong—...With us freaks, even if we win, we lose" (45). Unlike Teenie, however, Helga recognizes the need for action: "Why, we ain't even got organization. The hod carriers got that much. We can't tell the truth about the kitchen side of the door, because we ain't got the voice of organization...Well, it's that way with the servant problem—every other kind of labor gets a hearing. We don't" (220-221). Helga's passionate outcry is doomed to failure. She does not go on to organize domestic workers; instead, she dies in a charity ward, while stolid, passive Bertha accepts her fate and soldiers on uncomplainingly.

Bertha is possessed of a unique quality that enables her to act as an agent of positive change in other people's lives. In the novel's opening paragraphs, Hurst equates Bertha with the Norns, the supernatural women of Norse legend who control the destinies of both gods and men: "She was five feet, nine and a half, of flat-breasted bigness and her cheek-bones were pitched like Norn's...There must have been a good smattering of Scandinavian and even a wide streak of western Teutonic. Slav, too" (1). Bertha's passivity frustrates Helga, who complains: "'Bertha! Aw, she ain't human. She's a dray horse that's so used to pullin' she can't feel the harness...She's like a tomb, sitting hard on somethin' to hold it down. Hit her on the bean and she'll sit there gazing at the stars and not feel the hurt. I'm human. Bertha's a—hunk" (31-32). When
she is still young and vigorous, Bertha’s strength and willingness to do the most degrading work assures her continued employment. As she ages and loses strength, however, she can no longer find anything other than the most occasional daily work and is often at the point of starvation: “The half days made one calculate so. Inevitably the slashing blades of hunger that cut through and through the great organism of Bertha would begin to champ again…and the day’s food allotment was already spent down to the last penny” (315).

After describing Bertha’s lifetime of tragedy, Hurst grants her a happy ending. She meets Mr. Meyerbogen, a widower overwhelmed by the need to earn a living while caring for his four children. He offers her a room and a job “[b]y the month. By the—always—if you would blease (sic)” (326). The Meyerbogen children love Bertha and there is the clear implication that she will marry their father and become their stepmother. In the final scene, Bertha stands barefoot in the garden of her new home, her “toes tasting earth, the good earth, peasanely” [sic] (329). Love, family, and security—everything she has lacked in her life—are expressed through the image of the abundant garden in which she stands, from the “peas [that] ran up the sticks gayly” to the “tiny green grapes” that will eventually be pressed into wine (329). If food indeed is love, the author implies, then Bertha will never be hungry again.

Hurst’s concern with the urgent and pervasive issue of food insecurity was timely. Commenting on a 1934 Brookings Institute study of Depression-era income and poverty, the political economist Alan Nasser writes:

By 1929, seventy-one percent of American families earned incomes of under $2,500 a year, the level that the Bureau of Labor Statistics considered minimal to
maintain an adequate standard of living for a family of four. Sixty percent earned less than $2,000.00 per year, the amount determined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics ‘sufficient to supply only basic necessities.’ Fifty percent had less than $1700.00 and more than twenty percent had less than $1,000.00. ("Myth of the Middle Class")

Nasser concludes that “nothing resembling a middle class existed in the 1920s. Sixty percent of families earned less than what was required to provide ‘only basic necessities.’ Half of all families made even less that that, and more than one in five earned less than half that required to provide bare necessities.” He ends his essay with the observation: “Working Americans were poor. America was a poor country” ("Myth of the Middle Class").

The Brookings Institute report underscores the fact that although Hurst may appear to be writing about women whose lives are far removed from those of her readers, she is in fact speaking to concerns that many of them would have shared. Hurst reinforces the traditional correlation between food and love in both narratives and also uses the images of Teenie and Bertha growing their own food to urge her readers to develop the skills that will enable them to take care of themselves. It is striking that Hurst, a woman obsessed with maintaining a svelte figure, created two early heroines who are sympathetic, compassionate, self-reliant—and obese.

Throughout the rest of her long career, Hurst will continue to use food and body image as signifiers of social and economic problems. They play a particularly important role in her narratives about the conflicts experienced by new immigrants who seek to retain ties to their cultures of origin while their children try to become Americanized.
Whether or not her readers came from native-born or immigrant families, they would have been as aware of the immigration-related issues of their generation as Americans are today.

Between the 1880s and the 1920s, almost twenty-four million men, women, and children immigrated to the United States, many from Southern and Eastern Europe. By the early 1900s, nativists were calling for limits on immigration. Hurst’s own parents, assimilated German Jews who looked down on their newly-arrived Eastern European co-religionists, might well have agreed. Nevertheless, as Koppelman observes, Hurst knew that “[f]oreignness in short stories sold well and widely in the early twentieth century similar to the way ‘regionalism’ had sold in the last quarter of the nineteenth century” (“Naming of Katz” 240). Hurst, always a canny professional, soon realized that there was a particularly large audience for stories about the Lower East Side Jewish ghetto.

As Koppelman reminds us, food—or, more specifically, the lack of food—was an important reason many immigrants came to the United States:

Many of the ethnic groups who immigrated en masse to this country were motivated by hunger: Eastern European Jews, the Irish, Southern Italians, others. There were of course, other driving forces as well...But all of these other motivations were joined to and included hunger. And when these hungry people arrived at the end of their difficult and dangerous journeys their hunger was often not assuaged but continued to plague them...When these starving people finally began to get enough food, enough wasn’t enough. (LaFleshe, “Introduction” 253)
The equation of food with the security and opportunity to be found in the United States is often found in American Jewish literature. Too often, however, it is also associated with a certain unattractive type of maternal personality and the stereotype of the “Jewish mother” immediately conjures up an overbearing woman who uses food to control her children. Sophie Portnoy in Philip Roth’s 1969 *Portnoy’s Complaint* is often considered the archetypal “Jewish mother” but she has significant antecedents. Twenty years before Portnoy’s Complaint was published, a satirical essay by the novelist Isaac Rosenfeld, appeared in *Commentary* magazine. Rosenfeld writes:

> It has been observed…that the hysterical mother who stuffs her infant with forced feeding (thereby laying in, all unwittingly, the foundation for ulcers, diabetes, and intestinal cancer with each spoonful she crams down the hatch) is motivated by a desire to give security to her child. Basic security being unavailable to Jews in a hostile world, food becomes the source of the satisfactions society withholds.

(“Adam and Eve” 386)

Shades of Sophie Portnoy and Rosenfeld’s “hysterical mother” occasionally appear in Hurst’s writing but in general her Jewish women bear less of a relationship to Roth’s and Rosenfeld’s food-obsessed characters and are more profitably contrasted with the women created by another American Jewish author, Anzia Yezierska. Yezierska’s family emigrated from Eastern Europe during the 1890s and she and Hurst both began their writing careers during the early years of the twentieth century. Although they continued publishing throughout their long lifetimes, both had fallen out of critical and popular favor by the late 1930s.
Physical and psychological hunger is the central image in Yezierska’s narratives about Jewish immigrant families on Manhattan’s Lower East Side; as Ellen Golub writes, Yezierska “unfolds the central metaphor of her generation: hunger. For the promise of America…she has but one metaphor. For beauty, language, love, achievement—for all the desires she confronts in the immigrants’ name, issues of the mouth color and define her prose” (52). Yezierska places great importance on the act of sharing food with others: “She who feeds is good. He who hordes for himself is a bloodsucker, or evil” (Golub 56). Although Hurst’s Teenie Hoag and Bertha also take pleasure in showing love through the sharing of food, Hurst uses other signifiers as well to express her characters’ emotional longing. This is made clear In Lummox, for example, in which the descriptions of Bertha’s physical hunger underscore Hurst’s argument about the food insecurity of the working poor and Bertha’s emotional hunger is demonstrated through her response to music.

Both Hurst and Yezierska also use images of food to represent destructive forces. In Yezierska, food is often associated with her character’s frustrated desires for assimilation and achievement. Instead of representing security and accomplishment, food becomes an image of disappointment. Her 1920 Hungry Hearts, for example, includes several short stories about new immigrants whose hopes for a good life in the United States is thwarted; similarly, in The Bread Givers (1925), Yezierska includes an episode about an immigrant family that uses its small savings to purchase a grocery store, only to find out they have been defrauded. As Golub points out, in Yezierska “[d]issatisfaction is as much a way of life as hunger. Indeed, they are one and the same” (52). Hurst, a second-generation American, is more conscious of her readers’ desire for
a happy ending and often provides her hungry heroines with such a conclusion. For example, in “The Gold in Fish” (published the same year as The Bread Givers) she combines images of food and body image with a happy, albeit ironic, ending that argues in favor of the old-world way of life rather than the uncertain benefits of bland, mindless assimilation.

The narrative’s initial conflict centers around the resistance of elderly parents to their son’s decision to change the family’s last name. Morris Goldfish shocks his family when he announces that he now wishes to be called “Maurice” and has shortened the entire family’s last name to “Fish,” because “[c]ertain walks of life are closed to Morris Goldfish that I, as Maurice Fish, propose to enter” (256-257). His wife Irma has adjusted her body to meet the standards of the society the couple wishes to join. Irma has “gray eyes and a nose that had been straightened…weighed one hundred and fourteen pounds and attended Lyman Wastrel’s Stretching Classes for weight reduction” (257). Maurice’s equally status-conscious sister Reenie “rouged her lips and whitened her checks and…dripped finger nails like ruby cabochons” (274). Only Birdie, the unmarried sister, refuses to submit to his pretentious ambitions. Unlike Irma and Reenie, Birdie is no wraith-like gamin:

Her features were softly imbedded in heavy check, and her chin, instead of tapering down into wattles, threatened, ever so slightly, to double. There was a little ridge right on the back of Birdie’s neck that the bobbed hair enhanced. That knob was not infrequently red…And Birdie’s opulence she managed somehow to pour into frocks slightly too small for it. There always was a straining across the bust line. That look of armholes about to burst…Somewhere imbedded in Birdie’s
face was a certain squab-young prettiness. A one-hundred-and-seventy-six pound prettiness. (260-261)

Birdie will not give in to her siblings' desire to assimilate. She refuses to change her name, appearance, or personality because “a Goldfish out of water is one of the saddest sights in the world” (258) and further explains, “I got a kosher nature and I’m not ashamed of it. Ma and pa have too, only they’re blurred. Well, I’m not…I’m my own mistress” (263). As Koppelman observes, however, Birdie’s body “cannot be assimilated or converted…Because Birdie cannot control her body type, she cannot pass; her choices are limited to what attitude she will adopt toward her undisguisable, inescapable natal identity” (“Naming of Katz” 245).

The conflict between Americanization and the emotional pull of ethnic origins is illustrated in the family’s tensions about food. Maurice—“Morris Goldfish and Maurice Fish are two different human beings, mother” (256)—Reenie, and Irma reject the ethnic Jewish cooking that Birdie and her parents long for. After Maurice moves his parents from the Lower East Side into an elegant uptown apartment building Mrs. Goldfish “goes on the sly and buys herself a miltz [cow's spleen] and sneaks in the kitchen on the cook’s day out” to prepare a dish she and her husband relish (263). When Julius Goldfish, the father, expresses a longing for sauerkraut with boiled beef, his wife explains that their new landlord places “restrictions…from noisy cooking that smells” (278). When Birdie marries and moves to her husband’s tiny apartment in the Bronx, she uses food imagery to make it clear to him that she will be an old-fashioned wife who will give him “some of the good old-fashioned grub I haven’t tasted since we left Delancey. I’m going to give you a glimpse of a gefuldte [stuffed fish] heaven!” (268).
Unlike her siblings, Birdie does not consider herself so grand that she cannot “take herself down by Hester Street market for blintzes” to celebrate her father’s birthday (274). Throughout the narrative, Birdie manifests her loyalty to her family’s ethnic roots through her loyalty to Jewish food.

The conflict between traditional parents and assimilated children comes to a head as Julius Goldfish lies dying. When Reenie tells her mother that their father is ill because he eats “too much rich food,” Mrs. Goldfish finally stands up to her children:

“Yes, take away yet what little pleasure papa has got left. It’s better, Reenie, papa should have a little pressure from his blood than have to put up with such empty looking clear soups like you send him and such jelly from calves’ feet. Papa likes something what has got a stick to it to his ribs, like my lentil soup or a little spätzle with browned crumbs.”

“Glue with browned crumbs you mean, mother. That’s what coarse rich foods like that amount to.” (274)

After Julius dies, Mrs. Goldfish choses to live with Birdie in her unfashionable Bronx apartment rather than with her upwardly mobile children. Birdie spurns her siblings’ chauffeur-driven private cars in favor of bringing her mother to her new home by subway. “We could take a Bronx express up,” she explains, “but the local is better because I want to stop at Blatz’s Fish Market and get a miltz so you can gedaemtete [cook until it softens] it for supper” (281). As the two women make their way back to their ethnic and culinary roots, Mrs. Goldfish’s expression of new-found happiness is reflected in her “atavistic look of a woman backed by whole centuries of women who have known how to tear the entrails from fish” (281). “The Gold in Fish” ends on a
positive note of love, tradition, family—and the rich and enriching food that brought back memories of the old country to millions of emotionally hungry immigrants.

“The Gold in Fish” is part of a sub-genre of immigrant literature focused on what Koppelman describes as “[t]he struggle between the generations of immigrant women and their American-born daughters about food, eating, flesh, and fatness [that] has been one of the primary arenas in which the conflict between Old World and New, European family loyalty and American individualism, and tradition and assimilation has been waged, and class mobility has been gained or lost” (LaFleshe, “Afterword” 238). In her use of contrasting views of food and body image to reflect different cultural priorities as well as the traditional metaphors of love and security, Hurst anticipates the contemporary feminist rejection of the “cult of thinness” that has long dominated American standards of beauty. In addition, she emphasizes the importance of cultural diversity in place of the ideal of the total Americanization propounded by proponents of the melting pot theory of assimilation. In the analogy to a symphony orchestra put forward by Horace Kallen, a leading champion of cultural pluralism, this diversity of independent cultures would combine in a “symphony of civilization”:

As in an orchestra, every type of instrument has its specific timbre and tonality, founded in its substance and form; as every type has its appropriate theme and melody in the whole symphony, so in society each ethnic group is the natural instrument, its spirit and culture are its theme and melody, and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all make the symphony of civilization…

(“Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot”)
If we replace Kallen’s musical image with a food metaphor, we might say that Hurst is urging a smorgasbord-like approach to assimilation, in which ethnic and “all-American” foods exist side-by-side, with the flavors and satisfactions of each available to all.

To observe that Hurst’s descriptions of food and body image frequently appear throughout her wide-ranging discussions of social and cultural issues is not to imply that they can be reduced to a single metaphor; rather, taken together, they demonstrate different approaches in support of her overarching argument in favor of diversity of all kinds. During the 1930s, her use of images of food and bodies continues to evolve and provides the central images in two of her most compelling novels, Back Street and Imitation of Life.

*Back Street* is the story of Ray Schmidt, a woman whose obsessive love for a married man sets her on the path of self-destruction. Food imagery is first used to illustrate Ray’s lack of sexual interest in the men who court her when she is a young woman. Later, she demonstrates her deep love for Walter Saxel, the wealthy Jewish financier who sets her up in a “back street” apartment, by preparing lavish meals for him. Walter and Ray are both ultimately destroyed by food. Walter’s refusal to give up the ultra-rich foods he enjoys leads to his death from indigestion; without his ongoing financial support, Ray falls into extreme poverty and ultimately starves to death.

In *Imitation of Life*, two widowed mothers, one white and one black, join forces to provide for themselves and their young daughters. The stories of their intersecting lives form two narratives. In the narrative about Bea Pullman, the white woman, Hurst uses images of food to articulate the tension between a woman’s career ambitions and her desire to give and receive love. Bea sacrifices any chance for love to focus on building a
successful national restaurant chain; ironically, given Bea’s own rejection of domestic life, the popularity of the B. Pullman diners is based on their warm, home-like atmosphere. In the narrative about Delilah, the black woman, and her light-skinned daughter Peola, Hurst grounds her treatment of race in terms of body image, as Peola rejects her blackness and determines to live as a white woman.

Stephanie Bower describes Back Street as Hurst’s “critique of the gender roles at the heart of middle-class authority” (246). Ravitz calls it “Hurst’s most naturalistic novel…a clinical tale of degeneration, meticulous and scientific in its episodic portraits…” (155). Hurst accomplishes this through the use of images of food and body to illustrate the tensions between nourishment and starvation, passion and repression, and generosity and penury that characterize an illicit love affair. In the final chapters, she literally links the deaths of her two main characters to food—one the result of over-indulgence, the other from starvation.

As a young woman in 1880s Cincinnati, Ray Schmidt stands out as a local glamour girl. Of German-Lutheran background, she is sexy, stylish, and seemingly sophisticated. The married traveling salesmen who come to town find her irresistible and invite her to dinner, the theater, boating excursions, and horse races. She enjoys these good times but feels nothing when her dates try to kiss her at the end of the evening. This confuses the men who assume she is “fast”: “She had been acquiescent in a way that had puzzled him. It was as if he had left her untouched by his vigor, unimpressed by his force, but pleased with the knowledge that she had given him pleasure” (43). In fact, Ray is a traditional “good girl” and self-aware enough to wonder
“[w]hat is it about me makes a man feel I’m the kind a man can ask to be his mistress?” (60).

Ray’s life changes when she meets Walter Saxel. Although they are attracted to each other, marriage is impossible because Walter’s Jewish culture dictates that he only marry a young woman of his own faith. They separate only to encounter each other again after each moves independently to New York City. Ray is a popular young working woman who is well respected at her place of business. Walter has become a successful financier who is married to an appropriate woman and father of several children. They begin an affair and soon after Walter sets Ray up as his mistress in a small apartment. Although she recognizes that Walter is not a generous man, Ray accedes to his demand that she give up her job and be available to him at all times. She understands that “it meant—well, it meant cutting away from under her the business ground upon which her feet had so long stood” (160) and that she is living on the scraps of Walter’s life. Nevertheless, her entire raison d’être soon becomes that of pleasing him and she willingly gives up her independence to serve his whims.

Walter loves Ray, but although he is generous to his family, he is stingy toward her. For example, when his family summers in Europe, he pays for Ray to follow on a less luxurious boat. He and his wife stay in first-class hotels, but he puts Ray up in second-class, “back-street” quarters where she waits passively for the brief hours they can spend together. Once home again in New York, Ray finds it increasingly difficult to leave their apartment; in an inversion of the usual wife/mistress pattern, as Walter’s marital home becomes increasingly sophisticated, the flat he shares with Ray remains
old-fashioned. Bower points to this thematic inversion at the heart of Back Street, observing:

... the fallen woman in Hurst’s novel does not...follow the trajectory familiar to readers from other novels and films; unlike those heroines, who use their sexuality to negotiate their social ascent, acquiring along the way the diamonds and furs that signal their upper-class status and their moral degeneration, Ray Schmidt ends up more as Angel in the House than mistress; the home she maintains for her lover is an idealized enactment of middle-class domesticity.

(246)

As the years pass, Hurst is unsparing in her descriptions about the effects of aging on Ray’s body:

Not even the bald heads mounted on the short necks of paunchy bodies turned any longer to the spare figure with the metallic-looking hair and the fine lines in which the powder lingered like snow along ledges. A woman whose slenderness had turned lean and whose chic had petered out into neatness. (312)

Walter’s wife Corinne is also described in terms of the body as she matures from a young woman with the “plump white flesh, on her short neck and high little bosom, of a tender young fowl” (78) into the corpulent wife of a wealthy man, a woman whose “tender arms...felt almost as if the soft flesh were stuffed with a loose mash of farina instead of bone and sinew” (189). Ray, by contrast, grows thin and increasingly wizened as she ages. She realizes that Walter takes comfort in her loss of beauty because he feels it binds her more closely to him. She does worry about how she will support herself in the coming years—“Somehow, admitting these things to herself, the need of
assurance about the future became something horridly imperative” (312)—but she nevertheless becomes increasingly passive and dependent upon her lover.

The novel builds to its inevitable conclusion. While vacationing in a French spa town, Walter is taken ill after eating one of the overly rich dinners he insists Ray prepare for him. He dies later that evening in the arms of his wife, leaving Ray to face the future without financial resources or hope of gainful employment. She turns to gambling and is increasingly forced to live off the small bills tossed by the casino’s big winners to a group of poor women who live off their charity. Ray’s luck appears to turn one evening when she catches a large bill and realizes the donor is Walter’s younger son. Although desperate from hunger, she refuses to spend this final “gift” from her lover and dies that night from starvation, the money wrapped around her as an ironic signifier of Walter’s body.

Ray and Walter’s interfaith romance violates the social codes of their era and is thus in many ways as shocking as their clandestine affair. Intermarriage between Christians and Jews was strongly resisted by the small, insecure American Jewish community. As one of Ray’s high-school classmates explains: “With the Jewish fellows of his class, girls were divided into two classes—shiksas and the girls they would marry. Ray was a shiksa. Out of his class and out of his faith and out of his reckoning…” (64). Although elsewhere Hurst reinforces the idea of cultural pluralism, her portrayal of the separation of the Jewish and gentile communities in Back Street destabilizes Kallen’s idea of the “symphony of civilization,” which, taken to an extreme, can lead to a self-imposed segregation of cultures.
As Ray and Walter share their bodies through acts of love in their back-street apartment, Hurst subtly illustrates the profound discontinuity between what those bodies mean to each of them. To Walter, Ray is not only the source of erotic desire and sexual satisfaction. She also represents the all-approving, all-nourishing, all-embracing mother. In Ray’s company, Walter reverts from his adult role as a leading financier, important philanthropist, and responsible husband and father and once again becomes a little boy. Her flat is a place where “you could stretch yourself out in a Morris chair that was designed according to the most relaxed lines of the human body, and where you could be a little gross in the things you wanted” (158). Even Ray realizes “[w]hat a small boy he was!” (176). After returning from an extended business trip abroad, Walter describes his own accomplishments in detail, but there is “[n]ot one word, not one question, apparently not one direct concern for the interminable weariness of her waiting months” (218). Although she still loves him deeply, Ray recognizes Walter’s total self-involvement and constant emphasis on “I. I. I. I. I. I.” (343):


Like a spoiled child, Walter “could turn sulky with a suddenness that never ceased to terrify, past master that she was at placating” (228). And Ray is never able to assert her own needs in face of his demands:

The nearest she ever came to voicing some of the unconscious bitterness that on occasion would surge against him, was once when she said to him, quite
playfully, “That is because I guess always I must be content to walk skulking along the back streets of your life.” And he, who was notoriously quick to take offense, had sulked days after this. (228)

As Walter behaves as though he is a child, Ray longs for a real child. “Once, in the very early years, she had half tried to express to Walter her desire not to try to prevent issue, and had never forgotten the recoil of something in him that was more than fear” (329). The only time she leaves him takes place long into their relationship, when Ray learns that Corinne is pregnant for the third time. Her determination to move on soon evaporates and she quickly returns to Walter and does not bring up the subject again.

Ray expresses her thwarted maternal instinct through her neurotic treatment of the Babe, the black French poodle that is one of Walter’s few gifts to her. Both Walter and the Babe have ravenous appetites:

This cheeky little fellow, the poodle, was possessed of an appetite ridiculous for so small a dog. He liked cheesecake! Too cute. Yessir, ate greedily of the large Torten she was in the habit of keeping on hand for Walter. And another thing he shared with him was his very special appetite for smelts, prepared the way they used to fry them Over-the-Rhine [a heavily German district in Cincinnati, where Ray’s dates often took her for dinner], in breadcrumbs and hot butter. Once she had offered him, off the tip of a fork, a Lynnhaven oyster, another preference of Walter’s, and galumph, down it had gone! Funniest little fellow…(320-321)

Ray calls herself the Babe’s “Muvver” and talks to him in a cloying baby-voice. Just as she denies herself in order to cater to Walter’s whims, she denies herself to
indulge her Babe. Nearing starvation after Walter’s death, Ray nevertheless experiments with “[a]ll sorts of food substitutions that could even be made to seem amusing…Except that the Babe, rascal, silliest of precious darlings, would not have the wool pulled over his eyes. Meat once a day for him, and don’t you fool yourself!” (431).

Walter’s passion for Ray and Ray’s desire to show her love for him is often illustrated in terms of food. Walter is a gourmand and craves Ray’s rich home-cooking as much as he craves her body. Ray enjoys pleasing him in this way: “At once there developed in her, full-blown, out of the Zeus of past experiences, a talent for cookery…memories of the many succulent German and Austrian dishes that had been served to her in Vine Street [Cincinnati] food-palaces, lingered so poignantly against her palate, that she was able to reproduce them” (157). As her desire to express her love through food is aroused, so too is her sexual desire. Just as Walter willingly accepts her lifestyle sacrifices, he also accepts her cooking and her body:

If you happened to want, without employing any of the finesse necessary to coax down inhibitions in Corinne [Walter’s wife], in whom sex impulses were languid, to take Ray, she came as if the latent ecstasy pressing against the warm walls of her being were only awaiting release which he could make exquisite. She came to one on the high tide, relaxed and indescribably pliant. Supple, almost overpowering in the completeness of her surrender. (158)

Hurst’s sustained use of food and body imagery throughout Back Street reflects a growing stylistic maturity. In addition to writing a morality tale about the dangers of obsessive love, she is again talking to her readers about the need for women to be able to provide for themselves. In this context, it is important to remember that Back Street
was published during the depths of the Depression, when hunger and insolvency were pressing personal issues for many Americans; as Ravitz writes, “much in Back Street was resonating deep within the American psyche, not simply the 'other woman' and marriage ethics but the very real and evident challenges of the Great Depression survival...Back Street could not be waved off, simply, as Hurstian melodrama, manipulative and crude” (160). In her next novel, Imitation of Life, Hurst continues her exploration of significant social issues, including racism and the struggles of women alone, and once again uses tropes of food and body image to express the challenges her characters face and the triumphs and tragedies of their lives.

Although the female characters in Imitation of Life are more independent than Ray Schmidt, their lives are not any easier. Hurst raises her central question early in the narrative: “What happened to girls thrown on their own resources?” The rest of the novel is an exploration of the implications of her immediate answer: “They worked, of course” (15).

Imitation of Life is the story of two struggling widows who join forces in order to survive. Bea Pullman is a white woman with a young daughter who loses her husband after a brief, loveless marriage. Delilah—she is never granted a surname—is a black woman with a light-skinned daughter. Together, Bea and Delilah create a non-traditional family within which they raise their daughters and build a successful business. Bea assumes the traditional male role of wage-earner and Delilah performs the maternal function of homemaker. Delilah is an excellent cook and baker, and Bea soon recognizes the money-making potential of Delilah's delicious sugary desserts. She commercializes Delilah's recipes as well as her motherly persona and develops them
into the extraordinarily successful chain of “B. Pullman” restaurants that combine home-cooking and an idealized home-like atmosphere.

Daniel Itzkowitz describes Bea's and Delilah's family unit as “an extraordinarily unconventional household” (*Imitation*, “Introduction” xxii) that is at once white and black, slender and heavy-set, ambitious and nurturing. Although the two women’s personalities are very different, their lives are similar in important ways. Neither Bea nor Delilah has family, friends, or financial reserves to fall back on in an emergency. Although they both love their daughters deeply, the girls crush their mothers’ fondest dreams. Delilah wants her daughter Peola to accept her racial identity with pride and learn to face with dignity the slurs and discrimination she is certain to experience. Peola, however, is light enough to pass as white. She rejects her race and resolves to jump the color line, a decision that leads directly to her heartbroken mother’s death. Bea survives her daughter Jessie’s unintended, but deeply hurtful, betrayal, but at a price; when Bea realizes that they are both in love with the same man—and that he is in love with Jessie—she lets her own hopes die and steps out of the picture to permit her daughter to enjoy a fuller emotional, romantic, and sexual life than she herself will ever experience.

Delilah is often read as a type of “Aunt Jemima,” the all-nurturing, all-embracing “black mammy” whose portrait has been used since the 1890s to advertise pancake mix. During their chance first encounter on an Atlantic City street, for example, Bea sees Delilah as an “enormously buxom figure of a woman with a round black moon face that shone above an Alps of bosom” (75). Although it is clear throughout the novel that Bea and Delilah are equally dependent upon each other for survival, Delilah seemingly
accepts a subordinate position in their relationship. However, although Bea’s appropriation of Delilah’s delicious sugary treats as the basis of her restaurant empire is exploitative, Hurst makes it clear that Delilah considers herself an individual and resists commodification. Itzkowitz underscores this point, observing that “Delilah wants her uniqueness, her ‘style,’ to come across for future generations to know her.” On the other hand, “Bea imagines Delilah to be an exemplary mammy, lovable and self-sacrificing, whose very body is converted...into food and furniture—objects of consumption and comfort” (*Imitation*, “Introduction” xxiii). Itzkowitz’s comment also acknowledges the exploitative capitalistic nature of their relationship, in which Bea as business owner make money through the efforts of her worker. The present-day reader will be surprised that this clear difference in status does not cause any particular tension between the two women and that Delilah does not seem to feel exploited or resent performing a stereotype of blackness. We should keep in mind, however, that Delilah has been unemployed for several months when she meets Bea and would have had few opportunities for work other than domestic service. In addition, as Carla Kaplan reminds us, although “[w]hite readers loved the novel,” black readers—including Hurst’s friends Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes—were intensely critical of her racial stereotyping (*Miss Anne* 272).

Hurst’s description of Peola is more nuanced, although it does tend toward the stereotype of the tragic mulatta. In the 1934 and 1959 film adaptations of the novel, Peola comes to regret her decision to pass as white and returns to her African-American community of origin. In the novel, however, she remains firm in her decision. This has far more shocking implications than the behavior of the young Jewish wives in
“The Gold in Fish,” who reject their ethnic bodies by shortening their noses. Peola voluntarily undergoes sterilization so she cannot give birth to mixed-race children, marries a white man who knows nothing of her background, and moves with him to begin a new life in South America.

The issue of racial passing was particularly sensitive in 1920s America. According to Kaplan, the United States was then “in the grip of especially violent attempts to regulate social and racial ‘types.’” While other sexual and social taboos were falling by the wayside in this famously rebellious time, fixed racial lines were being drawn more sharply than at any other period of American history” (Passing, “Introduction” xiv-xv). The sociologist Charles S. Johnson has estimated that between 1900 and 1920 some 355,000 African Americans passed as white. The two communities often thought very differently about the issue. As Kaplan writes, during the 1920s and 1930s, “[i]n the [white] public imagination, the passer was a moral criminal…But in the hands of black writers, passing was a moral victory…[b]lack fiction also used passing to question the idea that race is a biological essence or identity in the blood” (Miss Anne 273).

B. Allyson Hobbs calls passing “a chosen exile,” emphasizing that race is a construct that “becomes evident when individuals changed their racial identity by changing location, clothing, speech, and life story, thus seemingly making themselves white…At times, passing was an act of rebellion against the racial regime; on other occasions, it was a challenge to African Americans’ struggle to shape and to nurture group identities and communities” (8). In Imitation of Life, Peola challenges the belief that race is a fixed identity when she says to her mother:
...I've prayed same as you, for the strength to be proud of being black under my white...But I'm not that stuff. I haven’t pride of race, or love of race. There’s nothing of the grand or of the stuff-martyrs-are-made about me. I can’t learn to endure being black in a white world. It might be easier if I was out-and-out black like you. Then there wouldn’t be any question. But I’m not. I’m light…I’m as white under my skin as I am on top. (245)

Peola’s light skin makes it possible for her to pass. Equally important, she feels herself to be “white” and wants to make sure she will no longer be the “girl who is hungry” for acceptance by the society with which she identifies. Delilah’s dark skin ensures that she could not reject her race even if she wanted to, much as Birdie Goldfish in “The Gold in Fish” recognizes that “I got a kosher nature and I’m not ashamed of it” (263). In building her restaurant empire, Bea appropriates and exploits the combination of Delilah’s nurturing “Aunt Jemima” appearance and delicious home cooking, but by cooking and caring for white people, Delilah makes sure that she is never again the “girl who is hungry.”

Kaplan considers Imitation of Life “an important experiment for Hurst, designed to prove to the modernists who ignored her and the critics who derided her that sentimentality, a deeply female literary form, could address the ‘hard’ social issues” (Miss Anne 268). At the end of the day, however, she considers Hurst effort to be a “failure of even her own liberal ideas,” concluding that “Fannie Hurst, by and large, affirmed the status quo” (Miss Anne 277). Nevertheless, Hurst’s well-intended if misguided attempt at depicting the modern-day legacy of slavery in America should not be dismissed out-of-hand. Many of her middle-class, middlebrow readers—white and
well-intentioned like herself—might have rejected an angrier or more challenging novel, but could accept Hurst’s premise and, as a result, potentially develop greater sensitivity to the nuances of race relations.

As important as the theme of racial passing subplot is to *Imitation of Life*, the major thrust of the narrative is the story of Bea Pullman, which follows the trajectory of a heroine’s rise from rags-to-riches and descent into emotional poverty. Bea’s personal and professional struggles and achievements are frequently described in terms of their association with food. Her father is a “city salesman for…[a] great pickle-and-relish concern” (8), a reminder to the reader that life is at the same time both sweet and sour. Hurst reinforces this point in geographic terms by situating the family’s Atlantic City home on “Arctic Avenue, between Georgia and Mississippi Avenues” (2), thus positioning the cold and frigid avenues of life immediately adjacent to those providing warmth and heat.

The novel opens with Bea’s fond memories of the meals lovingly prepared by her “darling mother” for herself, her father and Mr. Pullman, the border who becomes her husband: “Nice meals planned by Mother, around everyone’s likes and dislikes, except her dear own. ‘The chicken liver at the end of the platter is for you, Mr. Pullman, knowing you don’t eat rabbit.’ ‘Take plenty of floating island Bea; it’s your favorite dessert.’ ‘Mr. Chipley, that is your kind of sweet butter’” (2-3). When her mother dies, food comes instead to signify the vagaries of life and the means of earning a living. Bea agrees to marry Mr. Pullman for the sake of appearance rather than for love. Although her husband and father work for the same firm, Mr. Pullman’s job focuses on “the Amusement Pier on the Boardwalk, where he demonstrated the various uses of
different relishes and gave out pickle literature and little stone pickles on stick-pins” (8-9). One of his few interests is lecturing to Boardwalk audiences about “the life history of the tomato from the vine to the ketchup bottle” (11). Clearly, Mr. Pullman is an extremely dull man, although his “little side line in maple syrup” (26) does hint at a certain sweetness to his personality. Although she is very naive, Bea recognizes that other people “must regard this groom of hers as so much oatmeal…unctuous oatmeal” (37). When she realizes during their wedding dinner she will soon be having sex with him for the first time, she chokes on her sweet, creamy dessert: “Suddenly the ice-cream, as it slid from her spoon across her lips, simply would not go down. It lay melting for a long and uncomfortable while in her mouth, before she could swallow” (39).

Hurst also relates Bea’s early experience of motherhood through images of food and hunger. Mr. Pullman is killed in a railroad accident before their daughter is born. Preoccupied with caring for a demanding invalid father and an equally demanding infant, Bea has “little time for anything more than a hurried realization that here was a mouth whose first quiver and howl had shaken the world with imperious demand to be fed” (91). Bea’s working life also centers around food. She first takes over her husband’s pickles-and-relish sales route and later builds the enormously successful B. Pullman chain of restaurants. Bea eventually realizes there is more to life than professional success and once again becomes the girl who is hungry. This time, however, her hunger is for love and although she continues to enjoy professional and financial success, Bea’s emotional hunger will remain unsatisfied and unfulfilled.

Some contemporary critics contend that because Bea has no emotional or sexual life, she is living a mere “imitation of life.” Ravitz, for example, summarizes the plot by
saying that “having chosen between career and ’Man Love,’ an unfulfilled woman vaguely ponders the years of loneliness ahead” (161). Brooke Kroeger acknowledges that Bea focuses on her career “out of necessity,” but nevertheless concludes that “[i]n the end this blinders-on immersion in business leaves her empty, bored with her work, loveless, and terribly alone. By the time she is ready to embrace life more fully, there is nothing much left to embrace” (198). And Itzkowitz points out that “the novel’s grim finale might easily be read as a punishment for Bea’s ultimate choice of ambition over motherhood” (Imitation, “Introduction” xix). Thompson, on the other hand, recognizes what is missing from this interpretation:

The novel's ending, not surprisingly has been read by feminists as reactionary, a sign that business success is not enough to fulfill women and that they need motherhood and a man to make them happy…However, reading this novel as a message to women that they should focus on the personal instead of the professional is problematic, especially considering the horrific results of Ray Schmidt’s doing just that in Back Street…published two years before Imitation of Life. (187)

In addition, if we accept the argument that Bea’s life is somehow only an “imitation” of real life, we must also question whether Hurst is also implying that Peola, by denying her racial background and passing as white, is also leading a mere “imitation of life,” an interpretation I have not found in the existing criticism. I suggest that Hurst is not implying that Bea and Peola are leading “imitations” of life; instead, she is demonstrating that both women—each a girl thrown on her own resources—have made difficult personal decisions intended to ensure their financial security and must now live
with the consequences of those decisions. Hurst is thus not using “imitation” in the sense of a false copy of some idealized kind of “real” life in which women “have it all” in the second-wave feminist sense. Instead, she intends “imitation” in the Aristotelian sense of *mimesis*, the representation—which is to say, the imitation—of life through which her readers recognize the happy and sad aspects of their own lives. Just as Bea’s father and husband support their families by selling sweet-and-sour pickles-and-relish, so too does the world in which Hurst’s women live give them joys and sorrows, the sweet combined with the sour. Hurst’s heroines are not upper-middle-class women seeking self-actualization and personal fulfillment; they are the girls who are hungry, simply trying to survive.

A psychoanalyst might have much to say about the frequency with which Hurst, who was so obsessed with weight and dieting, uses food and body imagery in her fiction. A literary scholar would go even further and remark that while Hurst’s signifiers remain constant, the issues they signify vary greatly. In the texts I have considered, food and body image variously represent the presence and absence of sexual and maternal love; physical hunger and starvation; race; the situation of people whose bodies (and, by extension, other aspects of their lives) differ from the norm, and the struggles of independent working women at all levels of the economic spectrum.

Although Hurst considers a broad range of issues, similarities do link these narratives. With the exception of Birdie in “The Gold in Fish,” all the female protagonists go through most of their lives without the comforting presence of a loving mother or another maternal body to nurture and protect them. Bertha’s mother dies in childbirth. Ray Schmidt barely remembers her mother, who died when Ray was a young child. Bea
Pullman’s “darling mother” dies when Bea is in her early teens. After Peola abandons her mother, neither Delilah nor “Teenie” Hoag appears to have any living family. Only Peola has a mother who loves and tries to protect her.

It is also significant that, for woman to whom slimness was of vital importance, Hurst’s heavy-set characters tend to lead much fuller and richer lives than her slender ones. Teenie loses her money but experiences the love she longs for. Bertha finds a loving home and family, while her slender and pretty friend Helga dies in a charity ward. Julius Goldfish has three children but asks only to see his “large and hoarse” daughter Birdie before he dies; after his death, Birdie’s small apartment and ethnic cooking become her mother’s home of choice, not the elegant homes of her wealthier and thinner siblings (259).

The conclusions Hurst draws in Back Street and Imitation of Life are more nuanced. On the surface, Walter Saxel’s heavy-set wife Corinne has a better life than Ray, one filled with a caring husband, talented children, financial security, and material possessions. The reader might wonder whether Corinne would still be satisfied with her life if she knew her husband had supported a mistress throughout their marriage. But that would be a different novel; in Back Street, it is the slender Ray who meets a tragic end. In Imitation of Life, the stylish Bea is alone at the novel’s conclusion; although the heavy-set Delilah dies from heartbreak, she seems happier and more content throughout her lifetime than either the slender Bea or Peola.

Teenie Hoag, Birdie Goldfish, and Bertha are set apart from the general population by their weight and physical awkwardness. Through the narratives of their lives, Hurst reminds her readers that although America’s self-image was one of
unlimited bounty and opportunity, hunger and poverty continue to exist. Although Delilah is a racial stereotype, Ray, Bea, and Peola (who, in the same way as her mother, is never identified by a surname) look like the average woman. Hurst’s “girl who is hungry” is easily recognized by her reader as their sisters, cousins, neighbors—and sometimes themselves. And even Hurst’s well-fed women are driven by an emotional hunger. Nor did Hurst herself lose her own hunger for recognition as a serious writer, as well as a popular one. After the publication of *Imitation of Life*, she would go on to publish an additional eleven novels, an autobiography, and numerous short stories and magazine essays. Kroeger writes that her last three novels (*Family!, 1960; God Must Be Sad, 1961, and Fool—Be Still, 1964*) each sold “somewhere between ten and thirteen thousand copies. This may have been less than in the past, but her audience was solid and loyal enough for Doubleday [her publisher] to continue to take her seriously” (344). Ken McCormick, Hurst’s last editor, summed up her final narratives saying, “She had pretty well exhausted her subjects, but the will to go on writing was there” (qtd. Kroeger 344). Throughout her life, Hurst never forgot that an early editor once called her a “big hunk” of a girl and the “big hunk” of a girl from St. Louis never lost the “will to go on writing.” For an author who tried to keep an emotional distance from her characters, Hurst reveals her own unsatisfied hunger through her images of food and body. On the surface, her narratives are not particularly autobiographical, but they are part of her as she is part of them. As Hurst might well have said of her hungry, driven women: “Bertha, Teenie, Birdie, Ray, Bea, Peola, and Delilah—*c’est moi.*"
CHAPTER 4

“SO HAPPY FOR A TIME”: 
FANNIE HURST AND THE 1920s OPIOID EPIDEMIC

Fannie Hurst's fiction addresses critical issues of her time and their effect on the world in which she and her readers live. Her work thus provides a window into the power of popular literature to influence readers through narrative and to elicit empathy by investing readers in relationships with fictional characters. Her 1921 short story “She Walks in Beauty” exemplifies the ways in which Hurst argues her world by demonstrating the devastating consequences of morphine addiction on an individual and her family, an issue that has taken on renewed relevance in American society a century later.

In this connection, my analysis of Hurst’s short story shifts the emphasis away from a discussion of its place as “only one of the many mother/daughter stories Hurst published,” the category within which Susan Koppelman places it (Stories, “Introduction” xvi). Instead, I situate “She Walks in Beauty” within the genre of addiction literature, a wide-ranging category that includes autobiography, memoir, fiction, non-fiction, and what might be called “fictionalized memoir,” in which an author takes liberties with factual autobiography to enhance a narrative’s dramatic effect. Although addiction is not in general one of Hurst’s major concerns, she also employs drug-related imagery in “Roulette,” a short story that is contemporaneous with “She Walks in Beauty.” Through a comparison of the two narratives, I demonstrate the author’s flexibility in using the same social issue to illustrate different situations. I then discuss “She Walks in Beauty”
in connection with Eugene O’Neill’s semi-autobiographical play *Long Day’s Journey into Night* and demonstrate that in spite of differences in literary genre and era of publication, the two works are closely related in terms of the stylistic techniques the authors use to describe the physical and emotional effects of opioid addiction.

Considered in terms of plot alone, Hurst’s portrayal of the impact of morphine addiction on an upper-middle-class woman and her loved ones is compelling. In addition, she raises ancillary issues that have continued resonance today, including the role physicians play in over-prescribing addictive drugs and the nature of privatized addiction treatment. At first meeting, however, Carrie Samstag would seem to be an unlikely drug addict. Carrie is a 40-something widow who lives with her daughter Alma at Manhattan’s Bon Ton Hotel. It soon becomes apparent that Carrie is a woman with secrets. Unwilling to sacrifice either her upper-middle-class lifestyle or her late husband’s reputation as a successful businessman, she and Alma live far above their means. The more important family secret is Carrie’s addiction to the morphine originally prescribed by a physician to treat neuralgia-related pain. Alma is aware of her mother’s drug-dependency and determined to shield her from public humiliation. Alma’s total devotion to her mother includes her willingness to sacrifice an opportunity for marriage to Leo Friedlander, a partner with his father in a medical supply company. Alma is unsuccessful, however, at preventing Carrie’s marriage to Louis Latz, a chubby bachelor who also lives at the Bon Ton. The innocent Lou is oblivious to Carrie’s addiction and becomes increasingly resentful of what he perceives as Alma’s desire to keep him apart from his new wife.
As her drug dependency worsens, Carrie becomes slyer and subtler at evading Alma’s watchful eye. She slips away from home one afternoon and makes her way to a drug clinic on the Bowery, where she unsuccess fully attempts to obtain an illicit prescription for morphine. Alma follows her mother downtown and confronts her on the street outside the clinic. Carrie has reached her lowest point and her behavior is almost deranged. She finally escapes her daughter’s grasp and runs into the street, where she is struck and killed by a passing car.

The family’s secret dies with her. “[O]nly one bruise, a faint one, near the brow” (198) indicates that any destruction of her body has taken place; the presence of “undeniable pockmarks on Mrs. Samstag’s right forearm…I]ittle graves” (187) will be forever hidden from her husband and her friends. Lou finds solace in the thought that “just the memory of my Carrie—is almost enough. To think old me should have a memory like that…” (199). Alma reunites with Leo, who has his own secret to keep: he was the man at the clinic who denied Carrie the illicit prescription she was seeking. Leo alone understands the family’s true history and loves Alma all the more for it. The happy ending suggests that death is preferable to addiction.

Opium addiction was not a new phenomenon when “She Walks in Beauty” was published; it had been used in religious rituals, as a medical treatment, and for its euphoric effects for thousands of years. As early as 3,400 B.C.E., Sumarians in lower Mesopotamia referred to it as “the joy plant.” In 1680 an English apothecary named Thomas Sydenham introduced “Sydenham’s Laudanum,” a compound of opium, sherry wine, and herbs, as a treatment for a variety of medical complaints. In 1803, a German scientist isolated the active ingredient in opium and named it “morphine” after
Morpheus, the Greek god of dreams, a reference to its soporific effects. At that time, physicians believed that morphine was a safe and reliable compound that could be used in a variety of medical treatments. It was considered particularly useful because it could be produced in large amounts; Michael Brownstein writes that “[a]fter the invention of the hypodermic syringe and hollow needle in the 1850s, morphine began to be used for minor surgical procedures, for postoperative and chronic pain, and as an adjunct to general anesthetics” (5391). Codeine, another opioid derivative, was discovered in 1832. Heroin was synthesized in 1874 and first produced synthetically in 1898. Ironically, given what we now know about its addictive potential, heroin was at first “pronounced to be more potent than morphine and free of abuse liability” (Brownstein 5391).

The first opioid epidemic in the United States took place during the Civil War, when well-intentioned medical personnel used morphine to control the pain of wounded soldiers. Susan Zieger connects the growing abuse of narcotics in Great Britain and the United States during the nineteenth century “with bourgeois self-making, commercial imperialism, metropolitan consumerism, reform movements, a widening public sphere, and modernizing medicine” (8). In addition, social perceptions of addiction and addicts underwent profound changes during the nineteenth century. Zieger describes the evolution of these attitudes as moving “from disease and deviant desire to racial defect under the pressure of the discourses of degeneration and eugenics” (25). As Janet Farrell Brodie and Marc Redfield point out, the idea of the “addict” is relatively recent and:
emerged with the development, a little more than a century ago, of a medico-
legal discourse capable of reconciling human identity in the language of
pathology…Although growing numbers of Americans habitually used opium,
morphine, laudanum, cannabis, heroin, and beginning in the 1880s, cocaine,
there was little public anxiety and no formal campaign to restrict drug
consumption until the early twentieth century. (2-3)

Although the United States did not initially regulate the sale of narcotics, the
government undertook its mission with a vengeance as soon as drug use was
criminalized. Some states banned morphine use during the 1890s. The first federal law
regulating drug use, the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, required that patent
medicines be opiate-free. This was followed in 1909 with a ban on the importation of
opium and in 1914 with the passage of the Harrison Narcotics Act, which established
the “power of the federal government to regulate possession, use, and sale of narcotic
drugs” (Brodie and Redfield 3). The sale and use of heroin, once so hopefully hailed as
“free of abuse liability,” was criminalized in 1924. As the United States assumed a
growing international role during the years following World War I, it also became
involved in the “international control of populations and of drug supplies” (Zieger 27).

American women were particularly vulnerable to certain kinds of addiction. In a
passage that could be describing Carrie Samstag, Zieger writes that “[t]he first cohort of
medically recognized ‘addicts’—those whose growing habituations required higher
dosages, who then suffered when they could not obtain them—were often upper- and
middle-class women whose doctors had inadvertently habituated them to hypodermic
morphine for pain relief” (23). Further:
...these founding moments of medical knowledge could not be separated from a cultural fear of, and fascination with, women’s sexual appetites and imagined potential for deception...As a result, addiction remained stuck in an ominous twilight between immorality and disease: women’s imagined potential for maintaining a deceptive veneer of propriety while nurturing an inwardly vicious depravity lent itself well to the idea that addiction was a moral failing... (23)

Zieger emphasizes the gendered differences between male and female addicts, observing that “[m]en could always escape from the domestic sphere to take their pleasure in the smoking room or at the pub, club, or university—exclusively masculine homosocial spaces. In these ways, addiction began to coalesce through the gendered segregation of private pleasure for women and social or public pleasure for men...” (24-25). This observation is supported by Hurst’s narrative, in which Carrie takes morphine in secret while continuing to present a socially-acceptable face to the outside world.

“She Walks in Beauty” originally appeared in the August 1921 issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. In commenting on the story, Koppelman suggests that because Hurst’s mother had an “explosive and unpredictable temper” and “may have been the victim of a mood disorder,” “She Walks in Beauty” “may be an indirect record of her mother’s mood swings” (*Stories*, “Introduction xvi). A less psychoanalytically-oriented interpretation might suggest that Hurst’s narrative reflects her response to changing legal and social attitudes toward opioid use. Thus, far from being a typical mother-daughter story, it can be read as a case study of addiction among women whose “deceptive veneer of propriety” hides a “vicious depravity” that is revealed as Carrie descends from “plumply adorable” widow (172) to desperate addict.
Hurst structures her narrative through images of the ailing and addicted body. In the opening pages, the reader is told only that Carrie does not look well and that:

[w]hat ailed Mrs. Samstag was hardly organic. She was the victim of periodic and raging neuralgic fires that could sweep the right side of her head and down into her shoulder blade with a great crackling and blazing of nerves. It was not unusual for her daughter Alma to sit up the one or two nights that it would endure, unfailing through the wee hours in her chain of hot applications. (173)

Carrie is a woman who fits easily into upper-middle-class society, not a stereotypical “dope fiend.” As Hurst reveals her character’s morphine dependency, she makes it clear that Carrie is an innocent victim of addiction. She sobs to her daughter: “Let my neuralgia and Doctor Heyman’s prescription to cure it ruin my life…I never even knew what it was before the doctor gave his prescription.” Alma lovingly responds, “I’m not blaming you, sweetheart. I blame—Doctor Heyman—for prescribing it in the beginning” (182). Nevertheless, Alma recognizes that her mother’s situation has gone far beyond straightforward medical treatment: “It isn’t only the neuralgia any more. It’s just desire. That’s what’s so terrible to me, mamma. The way you have been taking it these last months. Just from—desire” (183).

Hurst is unsparing in her descriptions of the physical effects of morphine on Carrie’s body: “All the thousand thousand [sic] little pores of her body, screaming each one to be placated. They hurt the entire surface of her. That great storm at sea in her head; the crackle of lightning down that arm—” (186). Carrie’s cravings do not end after her marriage to Lou and “[o]nce, these first weeks of their marriage…she [Alma] saw the dreaded sign of the muddy pools under her mother’s eyes and the little quivering
nerve beneath the temple” (189). By the time her daughter confronts her mother outside the Bowery clinic, Carrie is clearly confused and almost totally incoherent:

“Thought you could fool me! Heh, Louis! I mean Alma.”

“Mamma, it’s Alma. It’s all right. Don’t you remember, we had this appointment? Come, dear.”

“No, you don’t! That’s a man following. Shh-h-h-h, Louis! I was fooling. I went up to him in the clinic” (snicker) “and I said to him, ‘Give you five dollars for a doctor’s certificate.’ That’s all I said to him, or any of them…” (197)

All the details in Hurst’s tightly-crafted narrative lead to the horror of Carrie’s death and the possibility of a happier new life for her daughter, as well as to insights into the effect of addiction on society. For example, Lou is more than a stereotypical mamma’s boy who finds love late in life; he represents the naiveté and obliviousness of a middle-class society that lacks any awareness that drug addiction can be present in its community. The detailed description of the Bon Ton Hotel, that “mausoleum of the hearth” (169), with which Hurst opens her narrative, skewers the emptiness of the lives of middle-aged women whose afternoons are “devoted entirely to the possible lack of length of the new season’s skirts or the intricacies of the new filet-lace patterns” (170). At the same time, Hurst reinforces the ordinariness of the unrecognized drug addict who lives among them. Carrie’s emphasis on her many ailments—“That’s me, Mr. Latz. Not sick—just ailing. I always say that it’s ridiculous that a woman in such perfect health as I am should be such a sufferer.” (173)—is flirtatious and designed to encourage Lou to propose. It also serves as a warning to the reader that about the tendency among the middle classes to deny the reality of addiction.
In contrast to Hurst’s descriptions of the consequences of morphine addiction in “She Walks in Beauty,” her short story “Roulette” includes references to a man’s youthful experiments with cocaine. Drug use is not the central theme of the narrative but serves instead as an example of the path he might have taken in life. In “Roulette,” Hurst is concerned with the role chance plays in an individual’s life, which she expresses in terms of what Susan Koppelman describes as her most frequent themes of “parent-child…relationships, the life of the urban working class, and the process of becoming educated” (“Educations” 516).

“Roulette” first appeared in Cosmopolitan magazine in May 1921, three months before the publication of “She Walks in Beauty.” It is the story of a Jewish family that escapes from a pogrom in its native Ukraine. During their flight, Sara and Mosher Turkletaub are forced to abandon Schmulka, one of their twin sons, who appears to be dead in a “horse trough, knocked there from its mother’s arms by the butt end of a bayonet, its red curls quite sticky in a circle of its little blood” (“Roulette”). Heartbroken, the Turkletaubs arrive in the United States with their surviving child, the black-haired Nicholai.

Nicholas, as he becomes known, is a wild youth who learns to control his reckless impulses through his mother’s devotion and guidance. He graduates from law school and eventually becomes a judge. Although long presumed dead, his twin Schmulka is actually alive and living in lower Manhattan with his foster mother, a drunken midwife who accidentally rescued him from the horse trough. Now known variously as Jason or Red, he lives a life of debauchery and crime. Nevertheless, he is
clearly as intellectually curious and possessed of the same fine legal mind as his twin brother.

The brothers unknowingly meet again in a courtroom in which Red has been brought up on murder charges and Nicholas is trying his first case. Sara, the proud mother of the judge, is in attendance. Red is acquitted and Sara, unaware that he is her lost son, tells Nicholas that she is drawn to the young man and feels she can help him find a better path in life.

Ironically, although Red lives the more degraded life, it is Nicholas who is drawn to drugs as a young man, making “a foray into the strange world of some packets of cocaine purloined from the rear of a vacated Chinese laundry” (“Roulette”). And this is not his only experiment with drugs. As Sara says to her husband:

"He liked it. I found it hid away in the toes of his gymnasium shoes and in the mouth to his bugle. He—liked that stuff…He'd snuff it up. I found him twice on his bed after school. All druggy-like—half sleeping and half laughing…You remember the time he broke his kneecap and how I foughted [sic] the doctors against the hypodermic and you got so mad because I wouldn't let him have it to ease the pain. I knew why it was better he should suffer than have it. I knew! It was a long fight I had with him alone, Mosher. He liked that—stuff." (“Roulette”)

Although Hurst writes about drug addiction in both “Roulette” and “She Walks in Beauty,” the issues she is addressing are not the same. Nicholas’s experiments with cocaine are representative of his youthful tendency to run wild. Hurst might as easily have made her point by portraying him drinking excessively or participating in illicit activities such as numbers running. Cocaine itself is a minor element in the story and
Hurst does not dwell on the emotional or physical effects of his use. “Roulette” instead illustrates the belief that a person’s fate is as dependent on the random twists and turns of life as on his or her innate qualities.

Hurst’s title “She Walks in Beauty” is an ironic allusion to Lord Byron’s lyric of the same name that praises a woman of exceptional beauty and modesty for spending her days in “goodness” and possessing “[a] mind at peace with all below/ A heart whose love is innocent!” This is a far cry from Carrie’s cunning and deceptive behavior as she seeks out illicit narcotics. Hurst’s “She Walks in Beauty” is not a love poem; it belongs instead to the genre known as addiction narratives. This genre includes Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” (1816), which is generally thought to have been written under the influence of opium; Thomas De Quincey’s autobiographical *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), and works by other nineteenth-century authors known to have experimented with opium, including John Keats, Francis Thompson, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Mid-twentieth-century addiction literature also includes works involving alcohol-dependence by authors including Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and John Cheever and narratives of drug addiction such as Nelson Algren’s *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1949), William S. Burroughs’s *The Naked Lunch* (1959), Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road* (1957), and Jacqueline Susann’s *Valley of the Dolls* (1966). In our own era of “alternative facts,” the veracity of several popular biographical narratives about youthful drug and alcohol use have been challenged and recategorized as fiction. These include Beatrice Sparks’s 1971 *Go Ask Alice*, a narrative about a middle-class teenage girl who dies of a drug overdose, and *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), James Frey’s account of the life of an adolescent alcoholic and crack user.
Addiction literature—particularly narratives about ordinary men and women caught in a web of alcohol and drug abuse—is itself a sub-category of sensation literature, a genre that enjoyed particular popularity in mid-nineteenth century England. Kathleen Tillotson calls the typical sensation narrative “a novel with a secret” (“Introduction,” *Woman in White* xv). Matthew Rubery emphasizes the genre’s focus on the dark side of everyday life, underscoring its emphasis on “scandalous events including murder, adultery, bigamy, fraud, madness, and sexual deviance often perpetrated by seemingly moral and upright individuals in familiar domestic settings.” Although it is often compared to gothic fiction, Pamela K. Gilbert instead associates nineteenth-century sensation literature with realism because “[t]he characters tend to be ordinary middle- to upper-class folk. Stories are set in the present or recent past, and in familiar locations. Their struggles have to do with ordinary Victorian challenges and the typical stuff of the novel—debt, bankruptcy, identity and the legitimacy of marriages, children and heirs” (184). In a statement that could easily be applied to “She Walks in Beauty,” Winfred Hughes emphasizes the role of sensation literature in destabilizing conventional domestic fiction: “It is axiomatic in the sensation novel that crime, evil, and violent or illicit passion have already found their way into ordinary middle-class surroundings. The result is perceived as nothing less than a direct, full-scale invasion of the middle-class domestic paradise” (43-44).

The central character in nineteenth-century sensation fiction is most often a woman. Unlike the beleaguered-but-virtuous Victorian heroine, however, the sensation heroine “begins to represent a moral ambivalence rather than a moral certainty…she has become a participant, however unwilling, as well as merely a victim” (Hughes 44).
In the same way, Carrie has clearly abandoned the "conventional social role assigned to women" (Hughes 45) and her physical, emotional, and moral descent into the depths of addiction fulfills Hughes’s observation that “the angel of the hearth may turn out to be an incubus” (45).

Abe Ravitz describes Hurst’s style as “sentimental realism” (38), but her depiction of the physical and emotional effects of opioid addiction in “She Walks in Beauty” is anything but sentimental. Hughes’ description of the “boldness and dash, the spectacular effect, the vitality, the raw edges, the lack of subtlety and depth, the impatience with detail” (197) that characterize sensation novels more appropriately describes Hurst’s literary style in this short story. Hurst’s closely-observed, almost journalistically-detached, reportage also calls to mind the “extreme realism” of the school of naturalism that flourished in American letters during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In addition, as Stephanie Lewis Thompson points out, although Hurst is generally regarded as a popular middlebrow writer, she “participated in the modernist revolution” of the 1920s (156):

…early in her career critics recognized Hurst as a potentially high-brow artist. Harper and Brothers’ publicity biography emphasizes Hurst’s daring narrative techniques, and the discussion of her style therein and in the reviews of her work of the 1920s should make us ask why Hurst is usually classified today (if she is discussed at all) as primarily a popular writer who addressed women’s issues, not as an aspiring modernist. (158)

Thompson also observes that, unlike her contemporaries Edith Wharton and Willa Cather, “Hurst did not denigrate the emerging narrative techniques we now deem
modernist; in fact, she praised narrative experimentation…” (156). Although Hurst does not employ stream-of-consciousness in “She Walks in Beauty” as she does in Lummox, the short story does reflect modernist views such as the rejection of the late-Victorian belief in optimism and faith in rational scientific principles.

“She Walks in Beauty” also reflects the modernist attitude that reality is based on subjective perception, not absolute fact. This is expressed, for example, in the different ways in which Louis Latz and Leo Friedlander respond to Carrie’s death. Lou has been happily oblivious to Carrie's addiction throughout their brief marriage, insisting she is ‘[n]ot as sick” as Alma claims and accusing his step-daughter of trying to sabotage his marriage. He continues to idealize his wife after her death:

The wonder was that Louis Latz, in his grief, was so proud. “To think,' he kept saying over and over again…”to think they should have happened to me. Two such women in one lifetime as my little mother—and her. Fat little old Louis to have had these two.” (198)

Leo Friedlander has a more clear-sighted view of the situation. In the type of ironic twist for which Hurst was noted, Leo is present at the drug clinic from which Carrie tries to obtain an illegal prescription. He knows that she is an addict and understands its impact on her daughter. Hurst ends the narrative on a hopeful note. Leo does not delude himself about Carrie and protects his beloved by keeping his knowledge to himself and assuring Alma that he shares with her the fiction of “—the b-beautiful—memory…of her—my mamma…” (199).

All family dramas about addiction do not end on such a hopeful note. A comparison of “She Walks and Beauty” and Eugene O'Neill's loosely autobiographical
Long Day’s Journey into Night provides a useful illustration of how different authors treat addiction. The play and the short story differ in genre, generation, and authorial gender, but share important similarities in terms of their portrayal of the effects of addiction on the individual and the family, as well as their emphasis on the way middle-class women were manipulated into addiction by their physicians.

Long Day’s Journey into Night is set during August 1912, a few years before “She Walks in Beauty” takes place. O’Neill, who grew up with a morphine-addicted mother and an alcoholic father, did not have to do any background research to create his devastating portrait of the Tyrone family. He was, however, sensitive to the play’s autobiographical elements and did not permit its publication or performance during his lifetime; as a result, although he completed Long Day’s Journey into Night in 1941, its first production did not take place until 1956, three years after the playwright’s death.

The character of James Tyrone is based on O’Neill’s father. He is a once-respected classical actor who sacrificed his artistic integrity in favor of popular success. His wife Mary is introduced to morphine by a physician trying to control her pain after the difficult birth of their youngest son, who dies of measles at age two. Jamie and Edmund Tyrone are their two dissolute grown sons who are alcoholics like their father. Unable to deal with the sorrows of her life, Mary frequently retreats into memories of her Catholic-school girlhood and her childhood desire to become a nun, an ambition she abandoned because “something happened to me” during the spring of her senior year in high school: “Yes, I remember. I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time” (176).
Long Day’s Journey into Night takes place at the Tyrones’ vacation home in Connecticut. Mary has recently returned from inpatient treatment at a rehabilitation facility and is clearly beginning to fall back into her old cravings. Her husband and sons drink, argue, drink some more, and variously blame Mary, her physicians, and each other for their failures in life. The play ends on a hopeless note, as James and Jamie stand by, drunk and immobilized, and Edmund tells his mother that he has been diagnosed with potentially-fatal tuberculosis. Mary, who is incapable of sustained comprehension of or compassion for her son’s condition, takes refuge in a retreat into a drugged haze.

The drama in both “She Walks in Beauty” and Long Day’s Journey into Night centers around a mother’s drug dependency. Both authors subtly signal early on that something is amiss without indicating the nature of the problem. Hurst describes as having “the look of one out of health” (173) and O’Neill’s stage direction indicates that “[w]hat strikes one immediately” about Mary “is her extreme nervousness” (12). Without mentioning the reason for his wife’s hospitalization, James Tyrone says to her, “I can’t tell you the deep happiness it gives me, darling, to see you as you’ve been since you came back to us, your dear old self again…So keep up the good work, Mary” (17).

As the nature of their addictions are revealed, it is made clear that both women were introduced to morphine by their doctors. They are not alone in this prescription-based drug dependency; as Zieger writes, many morphine addicts were women “whose growing habituations required higher dosages, who then suffered when they could not obtain them…often upper- and middle-class women whose doctors had inadvertently habituated them to hypodermic morphine for pain relief” (23). Significantly, neither
family blames the mother for her addiction. In the scene quoted earlier, for example, Alma assures her mother that she blames “Doctor Heyman—for prescribing it in the beginning” (182). Similarly, Mary Tyrone’s addiction also begins with a doctor’s prescription:

Jamie: She didn’t have anything to do with it!

Tyrone: I’m not blaming her.

Jamie: Then who are you blaming

Tyrone: You damned fool! No one was to blame!

Jamie: The bastard of a doctor was! From what Mama’s said, he was another cheap quack…! (39)

Mary and Carrie experience increasing anxiety as their craving for morphine grows. The drug has a soothing effect on Mary, who becomes languid and increasingly withdrawn from the world around her. O’Neill reflects this change in a stage direction: “Mary enters from the front parlor. At first one notices no change except that she appears to be less nervous…but then one becomes aware that her eyes are brighter, and there is a peculiar detachment in her voice and manner, as if she were a little withdrawn from her words and actions” (58). On the other hand, Carrie becomes increasingly aggressive as her craving for morphine grows stronger. Hurst introduces an element of horror in the scene in which Alma discovers her mother in the bathroom at two a.m.: “In the white-tiled Roman bathroom, the muddy circles suddenly out and angry beneath her eyes, her mother was standing before one of the full-length mirrors—snickering. There was a fresh little grave on the inside of her right forearm” (193).
Both women are secretive about the way in which they obtain prescriptions. Mary sends a household employee to the pharmacy to avoid being observed by neighbors. Carrie escapes her daughter’s watchful eye, takes the subway to a drug clinic in lower Manhattan, and lies to the staff there about losing her prescription: “…mamma lost her doctor’s certificate. That’s all I said to him. Saw him in the clinic—new clinic—‘give you five dollars for a doctor’s certificate’” (198).

Although its first audiences probably would not have identified with Mary Tyrone’s morphine addiction, *Long Day’s Journey into Night* is still a gripping drama. Similarly, mid-century readers who somehow discovered “She Walks in Beauty” might not have been aware that there were opioid-addicts such as Carrie living in their own communities. A century after these narratives take place, however, they assume compelling immediacy. America is now in the midst of an unprecedented opioid epidemic. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the number of opioid-related deaths in the United States has quadrupled since 1999, with opioids involved in more than sixty percent of the more than 500,000 overdose-deaths between 2000 and 2015. The CDC reported in 2015:

We now know that overdoses from prescription opioids are a driving factor in the 15-year increase in opioid overdose deaths. The amount of prescription opioids sold to pharmacies, hospitals, and doctors’ offices nearly quadrupled from 1999 to 2010, yet there had not been an overall change in the amount of pain that Americans reported. Deaths from prescription opioids—drugs like oxycodone, hydrocodone, and methadone—have more than quadrupled since 1999. (“Drug Overdose Deaths in U.S.”)
In light of these statistics, it is surprising that some reviews of the 2016 Broadway revival of *Long Day’s Journey into Night* dismiss Mary’s drug dependency and instead emphasize the seriousness of the alcoholism of the male characters. Writing in *Variety*, for example, the critic Marilyn Stasio condescendingly dismisses Mary’s struggles, commenting only that “…on this dreadful day, who could blame her for longing to retreat into the arms of morphine?” (*Variety*, 27 April 2016). The headline of Ben Brantley’s review in the *New York Times* ignores Mary’s addiction entirely, emphasizing its theme about alcoholism by calling the production “A Tempest in a Bourbon Bottle” (27 April 2016). Nevertheless, the struggles of a Mary Tyrone or a Carrie Samstag should not be so casually dismissed, particularly during an era in which newspapers report each day on the social, economic, and medical impact of opioid-abuse and in which middle-class families openly announce in obituaries that their loved ones died from drug-related causes. Indeed, although Hurst and O’Neill are speaking to their own generation, they are in many ways prescient in their anticipation of our era’s opioid-related issues.

Another area of continued relevance involves the role physicians play in creating opioid dependency. It is not clear from either text whether Carrie’s Dr. Heyman or Mary Tyrone’s Dr. Hardy are well-intentioned professionals or complicit enablers. Mary, however, sees them in a negative light: “I know what doctors are like. They’re all alike. Anything, they don’t care what, to keep you coming to them” (27). Indeed, although many ethical and compassionate physicians are torn between running the risk of addiction or treating a patient’s long-term suffering and pain, Mary’s cynicism is somewhat validated by a 2013 *New York Times* article in which Deborah Sontag reports on the increasing use of buprenorphine, an opioid that does not cause as intense a
“high” as heroin and prescription painkillers, but that also has potential for addiction. Sontag writes that “[a] relatively high proportion of buprenorphine doctors have troubled records. In West Virginia, a major hub of the opioid epidemic, the doctors listed are five times as likely to have been disciplined as doctors in general; in Maine, another center, they are 14 times as likely…at least 1,350 of 12,780 buprenorphine doctors nationally have been sanctioned for offenses that include excessive narcotics prescribing, insurance fraud, sexual misconduct, and practicing medicine while impaired. Some have been suspended or arrested, leaving patients in the lurch” (16 November 2013).

Both O’Neill and Hurst write about private institutions and clinics that continue to play a sometimes-ambiguous role in addiction treatment today. The Tyrones send Mary to a sanitarium and Carrie finds her way to a “newly equipped narcotic clinic on the Bowery below Canal Street, provided to medically administer to the pathological cravings of addicts” (197). Leo Friedlander’s connection to the clinic probably comes about in connection with his family’s medical-supply business. The reader wants to assume that both the clinic and Leo’s presence there are legitimate, but such clinics have become increasingly controversial in our own era. People who live near these centers often complain about the presence of addicts in their neighborhoods and the refuse (including used needles, urine, and excrement) they abandon on the streets. In addition, not every treatment center maintains high professional and ethical standards. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, there are currently more than 14,500 specialized drug treatment facilities operating in the United States. Some number among them are considered “addiction mills” where physician- and commercial-owners make money from the suffering of their clients. A 2017 investigation by The Boston
Globe and the medical-news agency STAT reported on a “national network of insurance fraud that preyed upon people desperate to break their addiction to opioids.” In connection with this study, Evan Allen and David Armstrong discovered that many addicts are sent to poorly-managed treatment centers “for expensive and often shoddy care” and give the example of the overdose deaths of two young men from Massachusetts who were recruited by patient brokers to facilities in Florida that failed to maintain proper standards (29 September 2017).

Hurst and O’Neill do not deal in the objective, statistical analysis that characterizes the work of health-care sociologists and investigative reporters. Instead, they portray the despair of addiction in terms of its impact on individual lives. O’Neill’s vision is unrelenting in its bleakness; addiction, whether to morphine or alcohol, destroys both the individual and the entire family. Long Day’s Journey into Night ends on a note of unredeemable tragedy, each character existing in total isolation, unable to be united with other human beings either by love or family loyalty. This is in stark contrast to the deep mother-daughter bond that characterizes even the most wrenching scenes in “She Walks in Beauty.” Alma is a loving and protective daughter and her compassionate behavior toward Carrie is paralleled by Leo’s protective attitude toward her. Hurst herself protects her characters by granting them happy endings—Carrie’s painless death, Lou’s loving memories of his wife and mother, Alma’s and Leo’s chance for a good life together. At the same time, however, the author hints that overly-protective love can become potentially dysfunctional. Just as Carrie lives well above her means in order to protect her late husband’s business reputation, Alma’s protection of her mother from public shame keeps her from obtaining appropriate medical treatment.
In addition, and in light of contemporary awareness of addiction mills, the present-day reader may question the exact nature of the narcotic clinic with which Leo is associated. O'Neill's ending is unambiguously tragic; although Hurst's is more hopeful, it is not quite as happy as it appears on the surface.

*Long Day's Journey into Night* is still revived to popular and critical success and O'Neill retains his long-held reputation as a major American playwright. On the other hand, “She Walks in Beauty” is virtually forgotten. This is a great loss, because “She Walks in Beauty” is as compelling as O'Neil's drama. Almost a century after its original publication, it continues to speak to a crisis affecting an increasing number of American families. One of Hurst’s great achievements in this narrative is to create an addict who is easily recognizable by her readers, a financially-strapped widow struggling to keep up appearances and to attract a second husband. Susan Koppelman, Hurst’s greatest contemporary advocate, includes “She Walks in Beauty” in her 2004 collection *The Stories of Fannie Hurst*. Koppelman ends her introduction to the edition urging that “[i]t is time to rediscover Fannie Hurst” (xxvi). In light of the current opioid crisis in the United States, “She Walks in Beauty” is a good place to begin this reevaluation.
CHAPTER 5

LIFE UPON THE WICKED STAGE:
ART AND AUTHENTICITY IN EDNA FERBER’S SHOW BOAT

In 1926, the actress Eva Le Gallienne, frustrated by what she considered the over-commercialization of the American theater, founded the not-for-profit Civic Repertory Theatre. Asserting that contemporary theater provided audiences with “[t]oo much cake, not enough bread,” she dedicated her troupe to producing high-quality plays regardless of their commercial appeal (Sheehy, Playbill 28 December 1998). Le Gallienne, a world-renowned actress, served as producer, director, and star of a number of the company’s productions, most of them dramas written by European playwrights. In the process, she also became a leader in the emerging American regional theater movement. That same year also saw the publication of Edna Ferber’s second novel, a multi-generational saga about a family that operates a showboat called the Cotton Blossom and whose backstage dramas are more powerful than the melodramas they present to audiences living along the banks of the Mississippi River.

Most contemporary critics of Show Boat are concerned with its heartbreaking subplot about Julie Dozier, the Cotton Blossom’s leading actress, whose life is ruined when she is revealed to be of mixed race. Popular attention is also focused on the frequent revivals of the 1927 musical adaptation by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II, including the 1936 and 1951 film versions. In this chapter, I argue that Ferber’s novel also engages with a significant contemporary aesthetic debate: her belief that American culture in general and American theater in particular were becoming too
dependent on European ideas at the expense of vibrant regional and ethnic sources, an attitude she expresses in a satiric description of the Civic Repertory Theatre. I suggest that the theme of the erosion of true American culture and the race subplot mutually reinforce Ferber's argument that racial, ethnic, and regional cultures should not be isolated within their communities of origin but should be shared by all Americans.

Ferber and Le Gallienne both loved the theater, but their tastes differed. Le Gallienne would have dismissed Cotton Blossom productions as mere "cake"—and excessively sugary snacks at that. Ferber, on the other hand, might have commented that Le Gallienne’s efforts had about them “nothing of genius, of greatness, of the divine fire” (*Show Boat* 294). Demonstrating how Ferber identifies the Mississippi River as the source of genuine American creativity, I offer a close reading of Ferber’s creation imagery that expands on Lori Harrison-Kahn’s observation that *Show Boat* “opens with a genesis tale” (80). In contrast to Harrison-Kahn’s view that “one of the defining aspects of the narrative is its resistance to origins” (80), I argue that Ferber uses the Mississippi not to represent cultural resistance but rather to firmly position the river as the generative origin of true American creativity.

*Show Boat* begins in the 1880s, when Andy Hawks purchases a showboat named the Cotton Blossom. Captain Andy is an experienced riverboat captain, an easy-going, good-natured man who is the titular captain of the showboat. The real authority, however, is his domineering wife, Parthenia Ann (Parthy) Hawks. A New Englander with the personality of the stereotypical spinster, Parthy is clearly surprised, but not, perhaps, entirely displeased, to find herself a married woman and mother living a vagabond life along the river. Over Parthy’s objections, her daughter Magnolia begins to
act with the troupe and falls in love with the dashing, irresponsible gambler-turned-actor Gaylord Ravenal. With the disapproving Parthy chaperoning from the wings, Magnolia and Gaylord conduct a passionate onstage romance in full view of the audience. They elope and return to the Cotton Blossom so that Magnolia can give birth on the river. The Ravenals eventually leave the troupe and settle in Chicago, where Gaylord resumes his career as a professional gambler. Gaylord abandons his family after a series of financial reversals and Magnolia supports herself and her daughter Kim in the only way she knows how, entertaining white audiences with the Negro spirituals she learned from the black workers on the Cotton Blossom. Although the convent-educated Kim holds far more bourgeois attitudes than her mother, she too enters show business and becomes a leading Broadway star. With an inheritance from her grandmother, Kim sets out to establish a “real American theatre in New York.” Magnolia does not share her daughter’s desire to produce “Ibsen and Hauptmann, and Werfel, and Schnitzler, and Molnar, and Chekhov, and Shakespeare even” (297) and returns to the Mississippi and the Cotton Blossom, her true emotional and artistic home. Their different approaches to performance thus reflect Ferber’s and Le Gallienne’s differing views in the contemporary debate about the purpose of theater, the choice of repertoire, and the aesthetic and social responsibilities directors and producers have to their society in general and their audiences in particular.

Although Ferber abandons the racial subplot midway through the narrative, it is central to the text. The subplot hinges on the revelation that Julie Dozier has been passing as white and is actually the mixed-race daughter of a black mother and a white father. Julie and her husband Steve are forced to leave the showboat to avoid arrest for
violating Southern miscegenation laws. In one of the novel’s most moving scenes, Magnolia runs after the couple as they leave the Cotton Blossom. She and Julie share an embrace, the world-weary woman and the innocent young girl joined in a moment of love and mutual understanding. Years later, Magnolia again encounters Julie, who is now working as a bookkeeper in a Chicago brothel. Magnolia once more tries to reach out to her, but Julie flees and disappears from both the scene and the narrative. In the same way that Parthy is identifiable as a stereotypical spinster, Julie can be read as a type of tragic mulatta. However, this stereotype does not weaken the emotional impact of her situation or her relationship with Magnolia. Nor, as I will argue, does Julie’s disappearance from the plot mean that the race theme does not continue to have important influence on the narrative.

The first two-thirds of the novel take place on and along the Mississippi and are followed by a transitional episode set in Chicago. The Chicago interlude is relatively brief but is of critical importance to the narrative because it redirects the issues Ferber is considering from the social problem to the aesthetic problem. The scene then shifts to the pseudo-sophisticated world of Manhattan theater. In discussing Ferber’s presentation of Magnolia’s and Kim’s lives in New York, I build on Patricia Oman’s observation that Ferber uses this episode to express her concern about “the homogenizing effects of modernism and industrialization on American culture” (66) and suggest that critics have long overlooked the implications of Ferber’s satiric description of Le Gallienne’s Civic Repertory Theatre, which reinforces her argument that authentic American culture is superior to the superficial world of a Manhattan theater that is dependent on European sources.
Ferber structures her text through a series of binaries that move her plot forward while at the same time reinforcing her position on the social and aesthetic issues she is considering. Her descriptions of the tension between white America and black America not only argue for greater racial tolerance but also reinforce the tension between so-called “highbrow” (i.e. European) versus “lowbrow” (i.e. regional American) culture. This is further reinforced by the binary she draws between the superficiality of city life and the romanticized world of the Mississippi.

*Show Boat* enjoyed immediate critical acclaim. In a publication review in *The Bookman*, for example, Grant Overton calls Ferber “the keenest social critic among our fiction writers” (143). Writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, Louis Kronenberger is almost exclusively concerned with the novel’s “romance and melodrama,” but nevertheless enthusiastic:

*Show Boat* comes as a spirited, full-breasted, tireless story, romantic because it is too alive to be what the realists call real; because it bears within itself a spirit of life which we seek rather than have; because it makes a period and mode of existence live again, not actually different from what they were, but more alluring than they could have been...This is little else but an irresistible story; but that, surely, is enough. (*NYT* 22 August 1926, qtd. Harrison-Kahn 202)

Current critical conversation about *Show Boat* tends to focus on how Ferber negotiates the intersection between race and gender. Describing the author as a “sentimental nationalist” (“Pax Americana” 420), Lauren Berlant identifies “two subaltern codes...[that] diverge in their relation to modernity: the ‘race’ code, central to knowledge but displaced from plot, represents a sign of the archaic origins of collective national
consciousness; in contrast, the gender/sexuality code, which takes over the plot, represents both modernity and the transcendence of historical memory” (“Pax Americana” 403). J.E. Smyth stresses that the author’s objective is to write a descriptive narrative, not a militant one, and that “Ferber and her adaptors were less interested in polarizing race than in exploring America’s mixed-race heritage” (111). Eliza McGraw associates the race and gender themes in Show Boat with its theater narrative, suggesting that Ferber conflates the real life of her heroine together with her stage persona, so that Magnolia “always seems to exist simultaneously onstage and off. Race in America, Ferber’s novel suggests, is artifice as much as reality” (61). Harrison-Kahn underscores the way in which Ferber applies white America’s fascination with black culture, observing that “[w]hat makes Show Boat an even more fascinating artifact of this time…is the fact that it is not truly a novel about black life, but instead a testament to the long-standing love affair between the American entertainment industry and African American culture, which reached its apex in the mid-1920s” (78). More recently, Oman argues in favor of “refram[ing] the scholarly discussion of Show Boat through the lens of regionalism because focusing just on race or gender ignores the pervasive fear of modernity in the original novel and all early adaptations” (65).

Ferber’s own view of her novel changed over time. In her 1963 autobiography, she describes Show Boat as the only one of her books “whose actual writing was the nearest I ever came to enjoyment of my particular craft” (Magic 152). In an earlier autobiography, however, she calls it as a lightweight among her fiction, dismissing it as “frankly romance and melodrama” (Treasure 170). Perhaps Ferber should not have dismissed her novel so casually because it is unique within her body of work. In contrast
to her usual straightforward descriptive style, it includes many references to Biblical
texts, ancient Greek history, and archetypal images, making it the most literary of her
novels. The lives of Magnolia and Gaylord and Julie and Steve are indeed “romance
and melodrama,” but taken together, they also help define important social and
aesthetic issues. It is telling that Ferber’s identification of race and the question of what
constitutes a true “American” culture as critical national issues still resonate almost a
century later.

Melodrama is a genre often dismissed by critics as trite and obvious. However,
melodrama has always played an important role in American theater; indeed, from the
late 1860s through the early 1900s—the period during which most of *Show Boat* takes
place—it was the most popular theatrical genre in the United States. It is a popular and
populist form of entertainment that often includes messages about injustice and calls for
social change and Ferber uses it here to express the very “power…theme…and protest”
she is arguing. Indeed, the theater historian Gary Richardson might have been thinking
about *Show Boat* when he writes that because melodrama “presents events and people
without the complexity called for in other dramatic forms,” it provides an “efficient
vehicle” through which audiences can explore “social institutions, movements, and
values” (115). In the same way the naive Cotton Blossom audiences respond directly
and emotionally to the troupe’s melodramas, Ferber’s middle-class readers could
directly, and often emotionally, respond to her depiction of critical issues affecting their
own society, relating to it in a way they could not to “Ibsen and Hauptmann, and Werfel,
and Schnitzler, and Molnar, and Chekhov, and Shakespeare even.”
A River Runs Through It

Although part of the narrative takes place in Chicago and Manhattan, the geographic heart of the novel is in the area bordering the southern half of the Mississippi River. The Mississippi—which separates North from South, East from West, slave state from free—has long held pride of place among rivers in the American imagination. Ferber is among the many authors who were drawn to it: “For some reason that I cannot explain, the river had held for me a mystery, a fascination, a terror, even, that has stayed in my subconscious through the years” (qtd. Gilbert 371). In fact, Ferber takes some poetic license in describing her connection to the river. In her 1939 autobiography, she claims that she never saw the Mississippi before beginning to write Show Boat, but that, “[a]t the very thought of the Mississippi there welled up in me from some hidden treasure-trove in my memory or imagination a torrent of visualized pictures, people, incidents. I don’t to this day know where that river knowledge came from. Perhaps, centuries and centuries ago, I was a little Jewish slave girl on the Nile” (Treasure 289). In her 1963 autobiography, however, she says she had in fact seen it “from a train window in my early childhood” (Magic 161). Whichever version is true, something about the Mississippi certainly drew her to it. Although she originally intended Show Boat to be set entirely within the old gambling district of Chicago, the river came to dominate the narrative. While each of the major characters takes a star turn in the novel, the Mississippi takes top billing throughout, stealing the show whenever it appears, even when ostensibly cast in a supporting role.

Rivers have long run through the human imagination. The flowing water of a river is often interpreted as an archetype of the life cycle as it proceeds from birth to death to
rebirth. As Thomas Ruys Smith writes, “[h]uman culture has always flourished on the banks of a defining river that flows throughout a nation’s conception of itself, mixing history and mythology in its waters, providing an image of idealized nationhood while narrating the story of society in the raw” (River of Dreams). Long before Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) and Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn (1884), the two iconic works about the Mississippi, were published, it “was America’s river, physically and culturally at the heart of the nation; but also, to apply Timothy Flint’s phrase, ‘ultima Thule’: distant, strange, mysterious, magical” (River of Dreams 14). Smith considers Show Boat a key text about the Mississippi because it “shaped the popular image of the river for decades to come” (“Roustabouts” 10) and ranks Magnolia Ravenal “next to Huck Finn and Jim” as “surely the river’s most important representative” (“Roustabouts” 27).

Although the Mississippi is central to the work of Stowe, Twain, and Ferber, the different ways in which they make use of this image underscores the different messages they seek to communicate to their readers. Stowe, for example, uses the Mississippi as a trope to represent the literal continuum between freedom and slavery and the metaphorical one between life and death. Thus, the runaway slave Eliza gains hope and finally freedom on her progression northward, while Uncle Tom experiences increasing degradation, despair, and ultimate death as he is sold further and further downriver.

Just as Stowe uses Uncle Tom’s Cabin to express her strong condemnation of slavery, Show Boat exposes its racist aftermath as a cruel and often-violent malignancy. Unlike Stowe, however, Ferber does not create a rigid binary between North and South. She condemns the South’s racism but also demonstrates deep appreciation for its
natural beauty and what she believes to be the sincerity of its regional and ethnic cultures. The South is thus criticized in the social-problem sections of the novel but praised in her discussion of the aesthetic problem of how the United States can create a unique national culture distinct from European sources.

The image of the Cotton Blossom making its stately way along the Mississippi brings to mind the raft in *Huckleberry Finn*, the safe space in which Huck and Jim are able to escape the racism and hypocrisy of “civilized” society. In *Show Boat*, the Cotton Blossom replaces the raft as the safe space in which people of different races and ethnic backgrounds should be able to live and work together in harmony. It is also the site at which the illusion of the theater should be separated from the reality of the quotidian world. “Should” is the operative word here. Except for a few scenes, as when Gaylord breaks character to respond directly to a drunk who is interrupting the performance, the showboat’s cast is almost always able to maintain the boundary between actor and audience. Such healthy boundaries are not always maintained backstage, as depicted most vividly in the reaction of one of the actresses to the revelation of Julie’s mixed racial background. As Julie and Steve prepare to leave the showboat, Elly, with whom Julie has always been on friendly terms, screams:

‘You get out of here!’ She turned in a frenzy to Andy. ‘She gets out of here with that ‘white trash she calls her husband or I go, and so I warn you. She’s black! She’s black! God, I was a fool not to see it all the time. Look at her, the nasty yellow—’ A stream of abuse, vile, obscene, born of the dregs of river talk heard through the years, now welled to Elly’s lips, distorting them horribly. (112)
Once the curtain goes down, Ferber implies, there is no safe space, either for the actors or the audience.

Stowe, Twain, and Ferber all make use of religious imagery but place different emphasis on its importance. Patricia Hill calls *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* “a public display of private, religious feeling designed to change both feelings and policy” (*UTC as a Religious Text*). Gregg Camfield writes that in *Huckleberry Finn*, “Twain depicts the entire range of American religious experience of the nineteenth century…readers are asked not so much to judge the truth of the beliefs as to see the consequences of each” (38). Ferber, on the other hand, is concerned with the origins of creativity, not issues of theology. Throughout her narrative of the Mississippi, she employs Old Testament imagery and classical references to explore the sources of creation and links both human life and artistic creation to the river’s power to generate and destroy. Her extended, often poetic, descriptions serve several rhetorical purposes, reinforcing her vision of the Mississippi as the source of American creativity and culture and also underscoring the importance of the melodramas the Cotton Blossom’s actors present to their naive but enthusiastic audiences.

Beginning with her dramatic opening scene, Ferber associates human life and artistic creation with the Mississippi’s power to both create and destroy. The novel opens with the adult Kim Ravenal recounting the story of how she received the “absurd monosyllable which comprises her given name.” Although she is dismissive of it—“Kim’s bad enough, God knows”—this act of naming is Ferber’s first example of creation through an act of unification, since “Kim” represents the combination of the “first letters of three states—Kentucky, Illinois, and Missouri—in all of which she was, incredibly
enough, born” (1). Because Kim is born in no specific locale, her very name reflects Oman’s point about the “homogenization and alienation from folk culture” that is reflected throughout her career (66-67).

Ferber’s descriptions of the Mississippi’s changing moods abound with Biblical imagery. Kim is born during a storm so fierce that the river is compared to a “tawny tiger, roused, furious, bloodthirsty, lashing out with its great tail, tearing with its cruel claws, and burying its fangs deep in the shore to swallow at a gulp land, houses, trees, cattle—humans, even; and roaring, snarling, howling hideously as it did so” (3). This description of birth out of chaos parallels the creation of the world out of chaos and the void in Genesis 1. The image of the Cotton Blossom quaking in the storm also alludes to the story of the Great Flood, the showboat functioning as a type of Noah’s ark. It also alludes to Genesis 7: “When the waters had swelled much more upon the earth, all the highest mountains everywhere under the sky were covered...And all flesh that stirred on earth perished—birds, cattle, beasts, and all the things that swarmed upon the earth, and all mankind” (Gen. 7:19-21). Ferber’s equivalent scene also describes the flood’s devastation and destruction: “Day after day, night after night, the rains came down melting the Northern ice and snow, filtering through the land of the Mississippi basin and finding its way...to the great hungry mother, Mississippi” (10). In both the Biblical story and Ferber’s text, the chaos of the flood leads to the renewal of life commanded by God to Noah and his sons: “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 9:1). Or, as the midwife who delivers Kim pronounces, “Fine a gal’s I ever see!” (6).

Creation in Genesis also takes place through acts of separation during which light is separated from darkness, sky from water, land from sea, and day from night.
Creation in *Show Boat* is similarly based on acts of separation: Kim’s birth separates a new human being from its mother’s womb and the image of the Cotton Blossom sailing through “the hurried harried country that still was intent on repairing the ravages of a Civil War” (60) reminds the reader that the scars of the American war of separation had not fully healed when *Show Boat* begins in the late 1800s. And some in the audience of the darkened showboat auditorium do not understand that theater is an illusion created by the separation of drama from reality, so that a “huge hairy backwoodsman” points a loaded gun at the actor playing the villain because he is convinced that the actor is truly “mishandling a beauty in distress” (126).

In the Bible, God “saw everything that He had made, and indeed, it was very good” (*Gen. 1:30*). Ferber is not as sanguine about acts of creation through separation. Some separations are benign, so that although “…the yellow waters of the Mississippi and the olive-green waters of the Ohio so disdainfully meet and refuse, with bull-necked pride, to mingle” (2), the rivers continue to roll on independently. But when, with similar bull-necked pride, Gaylord and Parthy—each personifying the most intense and opposite personality types of South and North—refuse to come to terms with one other, there is no chance for either familial or national unity: “You saw the two—Parthy and Ravenal—eyeing each other, backs to the wall, waiting for a chance to lunge and thrust” (155).

Racial segregation is Ferber’s most troubling example of the attempt to create a nation through the separation of its peoples. No reader will come away from Julie’s story feeling that “it was very good.” Ferber’s other examples of racial separation are equally troubling. The Cotton Blossom audience is segregated; white people sit in the
comfortable seats at the front of the house, while African Americans are confined to the back balconies. Ferber does suggest that some form of harmony can be restored through individual acts of charity and kindness. Significantly, these acts of reconciliation are often brought out by mixed-race characters. For example, she hints that Captain Andy may have mixed blood: “Andy told her [Parthy] that…he was descended, through his mother, from a long line of Basque fisher folk….It was probably true, and certainly accounted for his swarthy skin, his bright brown eyes, his impulsiveness, his vivacious manner” (21). When Parthy’s bossy manner and inflexibility force a talented, but alcoholic, African-American cook to quit his job, Andy shows compassion by making sure the man does not leave the showboat empty-handed: “It was said…that something round and gold and gleaming was seen to pass from the Captain’s hairy little brown hand to the big black paw” (24). And Magnolia learns moral lessons from the mixed-race Julie that her own mother is incapable of teaching her, as well as a great deal about the nature of romantic and sexual love between a woman and a man.

Ferber’s Mississippi serves as a symbol of birth, protection, comfort, and creativity. It is also a symbol of death. Captain Andy is among those it destroys, swept overboard during a storm as wild and violent as the one in which Kim is born: “…suddenly he was overboard unseen in the dimness, in the fog, in the savage swift current…wrapped in the coils of the old yellow serpent, tighter, tighter, deeper, deeper, until his struggles ceased. She had him at last” (190). The river is at once a source of both creation and destruction, indifferent to the hopes, desires, and fears of the men and women who live on and near it.
Ferber also situates her narrative within the world of ancient myth and drama. She is specific about the time, month, and year in which little Kim Ravenal is born—“five o’clock of a storm-racked April morning in 1889” (2)—while concurrently placing the scene within a timeless context that situates the Cotton Blossom simultaneously in the ancient Near East and the late-nineteenth century American South. Her imagery builds on what Smith describes as the late eighteenth-century vogue for “all things Egyptian” (*River of Dreams*): “The settlers on the Mississippi soon developed their own Egyptian associations, expressing their desires for the future through the names they hopefully awarded their towns: Cairo, Memphis, Thebes, Karnak, Alexandria” (*River of Dreams*). Magnolia gives birth while the showboat is docked “at a point just below Cairo, Illinois, in a region known as Little Egypt” (2)—so named “because it provided corn in times of hunger” (*River of Dreams*). When not on tour, the Hawks family makes its home in the “little town of Thebes, on the Mississippi” (21), a reference both to a modern town in Illinois and the legendary ancient cities. Similarly, as the Cotton Blossom floats southward along the Mississippi, it docks at towns situated in both 1880s America and the ancient world. It is, for example, no coincidence that Julie and Steve ask to be put off the showboat at a town called Xenia, a name is derived from the Greek word for “guest-friendship,” the standard of hospitality required to be shown to strangers. Mr. Pepper, the Cotton Blossom’s chief pilot, makes explicit the connection between the ancient and contemporary worlds: “Yessir, the Mississippi and this here Nile, over in Egypt, they’re a couple of old demons. I ain’t seen the Nile River, myself. Don’t expect to. This old river’s enough for one man to meet up with in his life” (32).
Magnolia’s deep association with the river is reflected in her initials, “M.R.,” which stand for both “Magnolia Ravenal” and “Mississippi River” and “[i]t was on the river that the “three great mysteries—Love and Birth and Death—had been revealed to her. All that she had known of happiness and tragedy and tranquility and adventure and romance and fulfillment was bound up in the rivers” (192). She acknowledges that the Cotton Blossom’s melodramas do not represent the height of artistic creativity, that the acting isn’t very good, or the plays original. But she also recognizes that the showboat audiences do not demand originality. Instead, they want the comfort and reassurance that comes from watching the same plays over and over: “River audiences liked the old plays. Came to see them again and again” (189). Nor does Magnolia make a strong distinction between the naive Cotton Blossom melodramas and the more professional theater she and Gaylord attend in Chicago. When her husband mocks the showboat performances as “catch-as-catch-can” acting and calls the Cotton Blossom an “old tub” and its stage a “hole in the wall” (236), Magnolia protests:

“I loved it. Everybody in the company was acting because they liked it…Maybe we weren’t very good but the audiences thought we were; and they cried in the places where they were supposed to cry, and laughed when they should have laughed, and believed it all, and were happy, and if that isn’t the theatre then what is?” (236)

The Cotton Blossom’s route changes after Captain Andy’s death. When Parthy takes formal command, she directs it northward “to the rivers of North Carolina and Maryland” (195). Instead of stopping at communities whose names recall ancient myths and legends, the troupe now performs at towns whose names derive from places in
England, such as Queenstown and “the town of Bath, on the Pimlico River” (195). The cultural allusions of these names are to reason and pragmatism, far different from the associations of Southern city names. With this move, Ferber shifts her gaze from the sources she feels makes American culture unique and turns her attention to what she considers the rigid, over-intellectualized theater of the North, charging that it has lost touch with America’s deep mythic roots by becoming overly dependent on European sources.

All the World’s a Stage

The narrative arc of Magnolia’s growth and development as a woman takes place concurrently with the description of her growth and development as a performer. The descriptions of the melodramas performed on the Cotton Blossom and the African-American spirituals Magnolia learns from black crew members reinforce Ferber’s argument that the unique roots of American culture are found in its regional, ethnic, and racial arts.

Although Ferber satirizes American theater in Show Boat’s final chapters, she never mocks or otherwise condescends to the naive, hard-working Cotton Blossom audiences. The housewives who fall in love with Gaylord, the backwoodsman who rises to defend the ingenue he thinks is being attacked, and the children who eagerly follow the members of the troupe as they parade through the small river towns to announce their performances are all honored for their innocence and willingness to move beyond their limited lives and connect, even momentarily, with a greater aesthetic vision. Nor does Ferber look down on the melodramas that the troupe presents each night. As
Richardson writes, the conventional stereotypes of “the mustache-twirling villain…the golden-haired heroine…the white-clad hero” do not acknowledge the genre’s “durability, its cross-cultural popularity, its service as an agent of socialization” (115) or its importance in helping audiences develop a sense of collective identity. Ferber articulates the socially unifying achievement of melodrama somewhat differently: “Here were blood, lust, love, passion. Here were warmth, enchantment, laughter, music. It was Anodyne. It was Lethe. It was Escape. It was the Theatre” (79).

The Chicago episode serves as an interlude between the enchanted artistic world of the Mississippi and the superficial world of the commercial Manhattan theater. It is also the period during which Magnolia is abandoned by the two people she loves most: Julie Dozier, who flees from her embrace when they reencounter each other in Chicago, and Gaylord, who deserts his family after a series of financial reverses. Julie and Gaylord do not leave Magnolia empty-handed, however. Each shares with her an artistic gift of great value and Magnolia’s ability to use them in her new life illustrates a new stage in her personal and artistic development.

Although Chicago in the 1880s was still a rough-and-ready boomtown, Magnolia is unfazed by her new surroundings. She is particularly drawn to its rich and varied theater world and attends performances with her husband “without being possessed of much discrimination with regard to it. Farce, comedy, melodrama…all held her interested, enthralled” (219). Ferber drops the names of actors now long-forgotten but well-known in that day and the Ravenals attend performances by “everyone from Julia Marlowe to Anna Held; from Bernhardt to Lillian Russell…the antics of the Rogers Brothers…Klaw and Erlanger’s company in Foxey Quiller” (219). When she is part of
the audience, Magnolia’s gaze is that of a naive observer, not that of someone who has herself participated in acts of theatrical creation. Gaylord also introduces her to vaudeville and basement theaters that feature amateur acts and it is in these small theaters that she seeks work after he abandons her. She immediately feels at home; entering a basement room for her first tryout, for example, “[t]here came over her—flowed over her like balm—a feeling of security, of peace, of home-coming. Here were accustomed surroundings. Here were the very sights and smells and sounds she knew best” (269). Using a borrowed banjo, she auditions by singing the Negro spirituals she learned from Queenie and Jo on the Cotton Blossom:

She threw back her head then as Jo had taught her, half closed her eyes, tapped time with the right foot, smartly. Imitative in this, she managed, too, to get into her voice that soft and husky Negro quality which for years she had heard on river boats, bayous, landings. I got a wings. You got a wings. All God’s chilling got a wings. (270-271)

The banjo is borrowed and so are the spirituals. Donna Campbell calls this “an appropriation at once tribute and theft” (“Purpose” 41). I would argue, however, that Magnolia is not demonstrating what Eric Lott calls a “particular desire to try on the accents of ‘blackness’” (6) and that her use of the spirituals should therefore not be considered theft. They were freely shared with her by the African-American workers on the Cotton Blossom. They are the basis of her education and cultural heritage. Through her description of Magnolia’s performance, Ferber focuses the reader’s attention on one way in which the United States can create a unique and authentic culture out of its disparate ethnic, religious, and racial elements. Perhaps most important, Magnolia
performs this music without the condescending use of blackface; indeed, her delivery is so authentic that a producer attending the tryout believes she is black. As Magnolia sings the spirituals she learned as a child on the showboat, she again unites the black and white experience, just as in the scene in which she and Julie embrace on the banks of the Mississippi, and “the black of the woman’s dress and the white of the child’s frock were as one” (115).

When Magnolia begins to perform the Negro spirituals in public, she assumes Julie’s emotional and performative roles. In one sense, this identification exemplifies Toni Morrison’s statement that white authors use black characters “to define the goals and enhance the qualities of white characters” (52). But Ferber does not entirely erase the black body from the text when she removes Julie from the narrative. Instead, by backgrounding the racial subplot, Ferber acknowledges that she alone cannot solve the social problem of racism in America. Magnolia’s performance of Negro spirituals can also be read less as an act of cultural appropriation than as another example of Ferber’s emphasis on creation through unification. Consistent with her conviction that true American culture must come from true American sources, the image of the white woman singing African-American spirituals reflects the ideal of *e pluribus unum*—out of many, one—the unique American belief that diverse peoples can be united into an authentic whole.

The American public responds enthusiastically and Magnolia soon becomes a popular Chicago-based entertainer. “A little more than a year later,” she is singing these spirituals “in the Masonic Roof bill, her name on the programme with those of Cissie Loftus and Marshall Wilder and the Four Cohans” (272). Almost in passing, Ferber
mentions that these spirituals also bring Magnolia “sudden success” in the New York theater (282). Just as everything else that happens in her life away from the Mississippi is essentially irrelevant to her, however, these achievements also fade “into unreality; they became unimportant fragmentary interludes” (282).

To Kim, however, the move to Manhattan is not an “unimportant fragmentary interlude.” It is the beginning of her real life as an actress. The deep connection to traditional American sources of creativity is broken because “[t]here was no Mississippi in Kim. Kim was like the Illinois River of Magnolia’s childhood days. Kim’s life flowed tranquilly between gentle green-clad shores, orderly, well regulated, dependable” (296). Kim will not return to the showboat and the profound link between the theater and the river—and between American theater and its creative roots—is irrevocably lost.

Unlike her mother, Kim is self-disciplined to the point of rigidity and works hard to train for her profession. Magnolia is an untutored, spontaneous performer who acts from the heart. Kim, on the other hand, prepares for her career in a calculated and professional manner, going about it “as she went about everything. Clearheaded. Thoughtful. Deliberate” (291). Although Magnolia objects that “actresses were not made in this way” (291), Kim takes “[f]encing lessons. Gymnastic dancing. Interpretive dancing. Singing lessons. Voice placing. French lessons” (292). Ferber situates her within a “new crop of intelligent, successful, deft, workmanlike, intuitive, vigorous, adaptable young women of the theatre” (293). Kim achieves early success, but possesses “nothing of genius, of greatness, of the divine fire…” (294). It is clear that she has lost all connection with the generative powers of the Mississippi; the only
remnants of that world in her sophisticated urban life is the “ham a la Queenie” served as “part of the cold buffet” at her elegant Manhattan dinner parties (295).

At this point, the Mississippi has almost completely disappeared from the narrative and it is here that Ferber introduces her satiric critique of the professional theater of her day. It is first directed against the critic Alexander Woollcott, with whom Ferber had a long-standing and very public feud. There is no subtlety here; Woollcott is referred to by name in a scene that takes place in the Manhattan home of Kim and Ken Cameron, her husband. Ken and Magnolia return from an evening at the theater, and Ken tells his wife that “your mama has been a very naughty girl”:

“Woollcott started it, anyway,” protested Magnolia Ravenal, lighting her cigarette.

“I should think a man who’s dramatic critic of the New York World would have more consideration for the dignity of his—“

…”in the second act she clutched him instead of me and he slapped her hand—“

“And pinched—”

“And Nola [Magnolia] gave him a sharp dig in the stomach, I'm afraid, with her elbow, and there was quite a commotion.” (280)

Even in 1926, many of Ferber’s readers would have missed the point of this exchange, which reinforces both the author’s insider status in Manhattan’s elite theatrical community and her critique of that world as superficial and derivative.

Ferber is more successful with her satire of Kim’s marriage. Unlike Magnolia and Gaylord’s tumultuous relationship, the Camerons enjoy a “successful and happy and very nice” marriage (295). But, Ferber hints, the deep sexual attraction between Magnolia and Gaylord is missing. Julie and Steve also shared this passion; even Parthy
is depicted as having her own moments of sexual desire: “The first time he [Captain Andy] kissed this tall, raw-boned New England woman he was startled at the robustness with which she met and returned the caress” (21). Kim and Ken, on the other hand, are portrayed less as lovers than as a power couple whose marriage is characterized by “[s]eparate bedrooms…Excellent friends. Nothing sordid. Personal liberty and privacy of thought and action” (295). There is the strong suggestion that Ken is gay: his “jejune plangent voice” (279) was “—well, Magnolia never acknowledged this, even to herself, but it was what she called the male interior decorator’s voice” (296).

The Camerons share a “polite, tender, thoughtful” (296) marriage that has “nothing of the divine fire”—which is not only a description of their relationship but also of the type of theater Kim favors and of which Magnolia and Ferber both disapprove.

Kim is a hardheaded businesswoman and plans to use an inheritance from her grandmother to fulfill her great dream:

“Half a million! Mother! Ken! It means the plays I want, and Ken to produce them. It means that I can establish a real American theatre in New York. I can do the plays I’ve been longing to do—Ibsen and Hauptmann, and Werfel, and Schnitzler, and Molnar, and Chekhov, and Shakespeare even. Ken! We'll call it the American Theatre!” (297).

The irony of an “American Theatre” exclusively devoted to producing European plays is not lost on Magnolia:

“The American Theatre,” Magnolia repeated after her, thoughtfully. And smiled then. “The American Theatre.” She looked a trifle uncomfortable, as one who has heard a good joke, and has no one with whom to share it. (297-298)
This moment of satire succeeds for the very reason Ferber’s satire of Woollcott fails. The literal meaning of the scene is clear and the reader can enjoy the irony without necessarily understanding the reference to the Civic Repertory Theatre, which was established only four months before the publication of Show Boat. During its first year of operation, Le Gallienne’s troupe presented plays by, among others, Ibsen, Molnar, Chekhov, and Goldoni, but does not seem to have featured any American playwrights. No wonder Magnolia smiles to herself when she hears of Kim’s plans.

Although Show Boat includes many references to leading actresses of the twenties including Eleanora Duse, Sarah Bernhardt, Lillian Russell, Helena Modjeska, and Joan Fontaine (294), Ferber never mentions Le Gallienne. Nor does she refer to the actress in either of her autobiographies. In her biography of Le Gallienne, Helen Sheehy mentions Ferber only once, in connection with the actress’s comment about The Royal Family, a play Ferber wrote in 1927 in collaboration with George S. Kaufman: “awful” (365). (Late in her career, Le Gallienne overcame her disdain for The Royal Family long enough to play a leading role in a Broadway revival and on tour (Sheehy 416). However, given the inbred world of Manhattan theater, it is virtually impossible that their paths never crossed. In light of Ferber’s satiric allusion to the Civic Repertory Theatre in Show Boat, it is also possible that she has Le Galliene’s in mind when Magnolia says to her daughter and son-in-law that the star of a “serious” Broadway play “…doesn’t act. Everything she did and everything she said was right. And I was as carried out of myself as though I were listening to a clock strike. When I go to the theater I want to care. In the old days maybe they didn’t know so much about tempo and rhythm, but in the audience strong men wept and women fainted…” (294).
Kim, on the other hand, would have agreed with Le Gallienne's distinction between “the art of drama and...theatrical show business” and her belief that “[i]n order for the theatre to be important once more to the people, commercialism must be banished from it” (qtd. Sheehy 187). Consistent with her earlier arguments about the importance of creation through unification, Ferber might privately have hoped for union of the popular and the intellectual, but these two approaches to the theater do not come easily together in practice. As Sheehy writes, “[s]ometimes the paths [between art and show business] would intersect, but for the most part the contrast was clear” (68). Although critics and scholars have traditionally held Le Gallienne’s view of the American stage in higher esteem than they do the work of middlebrow playwrights such as Ferber, Ferber’s approach is better designed to keep the theater alive by recognizing that content, audience, and revenue most often go hand-in-hand. Time has proven that these visions are not necessarily mutually exclusive and that American culture has room for both. But that was not true in Magnolia’s case or in Ferber’s opinion. Magnolia returns without regret to the river that is her emotional, cultural, and artistic home.

Ferber will continue to write about critical social issues such as racism and the place of women in society throughout her long career. Show Boat is unique among her work in its focus on important aesthetic issues as well as its incorporation of myth and archetype. Throughout her narrative, Ferber argues forcefully against the American stage’s continued dependence on European sources that do not reflect the vitality of the authentic culture found among America’s diverse regions and ethnicities, sources of creativity that, she believes, belong to all Americans.
At the end of the day, Ferber’s vision of a popular theater that appealed to a broad audience was more varied than it might initially seem. It was not limited to song-and-dance acts or the old-fashioned melodramas popular aboard the Cotton Blossom and the basement theaters of Chicago. Ferber’s vision was of an American stage that integrated song and story, melodrama and realism, and romance and humor into a unified whole. The resulting creation would unite elements drawn from the diverse American geography and experience and result in a truly national culture. Such a vision might incorporate elements of the European tradition but would not be totally dependent upon it. In 1927, such a production opened on Broadway and changed theater history. Based on a best-selling novel, the show is still frequently produced and has been twice adapted for the screen. The musical shares its name with the novel from which it was adapted: Show Boat.
CHAPTER 6

THE MANY LONG-DUMB VOICES:
THE SOCIAL AND AESTHETIC LOSS OF VOICE IN HURST’S LUMMOX

Fannie Hurst’s 1916 short story “Sob Sister” is about a middle-aged kept woman whose lover throws her over for a “[n]ice clean little—girl (sic), fifteen thou with her, and her old man half owner in the Weeko Woolen Mills” (108). Mae Munroe was once a good-looking chorus girl, but she is an aging woman now. Max, her lover, warns her to “[k]eep your looks, girl; you may need ‘em” (103). But Mae has no resources other than her fading beauty to fall back on. The story ends with the strong suggestion that she is about to become another lonely, anonymous suicide.

A significant portion of Hurst’s readers were housewives who might not easily identify with Mae’s situation as an abandoned kept woman. Most of them, however, would have understood that their own financial survival was also dependent on a man’s good health and good will. Unfortunately, the expression “sob sister” became a sobriquet for Hurst’s sometimes melodramatic style of writing, and, in the same way as her character, the author came to be dismissed as one of what Max calls “the gang of sob sisters…whining like you got your foot caught in a machine and can’t get it out…you’re all either in the blues or nagging” (101). Some contemporary critics, however, have begun to recognize that Hurst was more than just a writer of commercial pulp fiction. In Susan Koppelman’s words, “she transferred the meticulous artistry of the nineteenth-century regionalist realists—their emphasis on the telling details of domestic life, accessible language, and stories of common women and social injustice—to urban
workers of the early twentieth century. She was an ironist, a humorist, and a modern tragedian” (Stories, “Introduction” xviii). Throughout her long literary career, Hurst was a thoughtful and conscientious writer who used her texts to argue in passionate defense of a variety of liberal social issues as important in our era as her own, including women’s rights, fair labor practices, and racial equality. By the time “Sob Sister” appeared in Metropolitan Magazine, she had published short stories about, *inter alia*, the moral consequences of ruthless capitalism (“Summer Resources” 1912), spousal abuse (“The Other Cheek” 1914), and the need for better medical care for the working classes (“T.B.” 1915).

Hurst’s use of the expression “sob sister” as the title of a short story is telling. The phrase was coined in 1907 by a male journalist to describe women reporters covering the sentimental and emotional side of the lurid murder of the architect Stanford White by a jealous husband. The description was intended as a put-down; as Karen Roggenkamp writes, “critics used the phrase ‘sob sister’ pejoratively, to describe apparently sympathetic writing, vivid emotion expressed in the name of selling papers” (125). Hurst’s ironic use of the expression may have been intended to underscore the tragedy of Mae’s ultimate suicide, but, as Koppelman writes, it soon “became the contemptuous and dismissive sobriquet for Hurst herself” (Stories, “Introduction” xxiv).

For example, even Harry Salpeter’s otherwise complimentary interview with the author in The Bookman is offset by the use of the dismissive expression in the headline: “Fannie Hurst: Sob-Sister of American Fiction” (612).

All this meant that Hurst had something to prove and she undertook this in her second novel. In *Lummox* (1923), she undertakes a modernist experiment and uses
literary techniques such as stream-of-consciousness, interior monologue, and impressionistic, often introspective, description. *Lummox* is her only modernist novel and was her personal favorite among her vast oeuvre. If it is unique among her work because of its literary style, it is representative of her other narratives in that it reflects a profound engagement with critical social and aesthetic issues of her generation. In *Lummox*, Hurst focuses on the often-ignored situation of the working poor, in particular domestic workers, that anonymous army of poor women (and a few men) who worked without job security, guaranteed income, or collective representation. Bertha, the protagonist, uncomplainingly performs the “unmentionable chores of slops and bedding” (132). She is left pregnant after being raped by the son of one of her first employers, falsely accused of theft by another, and cheated out of her wages by fellow servants. Bertha is not exactly illiterate—she reads and writes with effort—but she is slow of speech and slow of tongue, a passive, inarticulate woman who does not struggle against her fate.

Although domestic workers such as Bertha lacked collective representation, a thriving union movement did, in fact, emerge in the United States during the nineteenth century. During the World War I years of 1914-1918, traditional adversaries in government, industry, and labor unions collaborated in support of the war effort. But by the 1920s, when *Lummox* was published and partly takes place, an increasingly affluent American middle class had begun to view unions as working against their interests. *Lummox* is thus an important reminder about the continued exploitation of the working class, and, in particular, of the vulnerability of its most isolated and unrepresented workers.
Hurst’s ambitions for her novel did not end here; she had serious stylistic ambitions as well. As Alice Childress explains, “[i]n spite of mean circumstance, Bertha finds that life can be sweet…We soon appreciate her keen awareness of light, sound, hearing, and touch. The writer pushes the reader to search for ever greater meanings, deeper truth than what is on the surface” (Lummox, “Introduction” vii). I elaborate on Childress’s comment about these “greater meanings” and “deeper truth” to demonstrate how Hurst develops both her social-justice theme and her aesthetic argument. I first present a close reading that demonstrates the ways in which the author combines arguments in favor of economic justice for the working poor with a meditation on the place of music in the life of the common man and woman. I demonstrate how Hurst uses the realistic, third-person narrative voice for which she was already well-known to develop the social-justice theme and how she uses modernist techniques to illustrate the universality of music.

In particular, Hurst elaborates her aesthetic theme in the scenes in which Bertha transfers directly into music the thoughts she cannot articulate in words. Here, the author’s greatest challenge is to employ modernist techniques that allow her to move beyond writing a narrative about music into writing one that is music itself. I argue that Hurst’s achievement can be measured by her success in combining such disparate themes and styles into a single narrative—indeed, sometimes within a single paragraph—that is at once unified and compelling.

I next situate Lummox in relationship to an important literary antecedent, Rebecca Harding Davis’s 1861 “Life in the Coal Mines,” which also reflects the yearning for aesthetic beauty among the exploited working poor. To further contextualize Hurst’s
achievement, I then compare her literary style in *Lummox* to that of Gertrude Stein in *The Making of Americans* (1925) and her experiments with images of color and sound to James Joyce’s use of similar tropes in *Ulysses* (1922). These comparisons will serve to help recontextualize Hurst’s achievement and support present-day efforts by Susan Koppelman and others to restore her literary reputation and reposition her among the influential authors of her generation.

What They Read

In his 2009 study *What America Read: Taste, Class and the Novel-1920-1960*, Gordon Hutner might well have had Hurst in mind when he describes the disdain 1920s critics had for the kind of middlebrow realism designed to “interpret bourgeois lives for a bourgeois audience” (83), thus helping middle-class readers confront their “fear of [the] marginality and emptiness at the heart of modern life” (85). Hutner establishes a binary between the “chronicling and exact rendering” of realistic writers such as William Dean Howells and the “newly prevailing values for ambiguity, temporal dislocation, and narrative opacity” (41) of Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, and other modernists. In *Lummox*, Hurst works hard to break down this binary and her narrative emerges as a unique—indeed, a genre-bending—text that lives up to the modernist watchword: “Make It New.”

As I have noted, *Lummox* was Hurst’s personal favorite among her extensive body of work. Many reviewers at the time of publication agreed, generally considering it her best piece of fiction to date. Stephanie Lewis Thompson quotes a review in *The Bookman* that describes *Lummox* as “arresting and powerful” and containing “passages
of great beauty.” The Boston Transcript described the novel as “seem[ing] to move to vast, unheard but clearly sensed rhythms.” An anonymous reviewer for The New York Times was equally impressed, writing that “with a diaphanous and almost mystic skill she has fashioned a heroic character from indifferent material” (qtd. Thompson 206). Not all reviews were positive. “It isn't a good book, nor is it bad,” Nancy Telfair writes in The Forum (March 1924) and an anonymous reviewer for a Midwestern newspaper dismisses Hurst's style as “weary.”

Hurst is playing for big stakes here by trying to gain respect as a “serious” writer while at the same time remaining a popular one. This is a significant challenge; as every author knows, critical acclaim is often very different from reader response. In creating an impoverished, physically awkward, and intellectually limited protagonist—and at the same time using an uncharacteristic style to tell her story—Hurst risked losing her regular audience. There was no guarantee that readers who eagerly purchased copies of the Saturday Evening Post, Cosmopolitan, Metropolitan Magazine, and the other mass-market publications in which her fiction regularly appeared would follow her into this experimental genre. Part of her challenge was thus to persuade her readers to recognize Bertha as a human being like themselves rather than view her with an attitude of sentimental or condescending sympathy. She achieves this sense of identification through the use of sub-plots that describe Bertha’s interactions with her employers and the profound influence she has on the lives of the people for whom she works. Bertha suffers from the food and housing insecurity of the poor, but the Farleys, the Musliners, the Wallensteins, and the Oessetrichs suffer from middle- and upper-middle-class problems that range from sexual inhibition to the tensions of religious
intermarriage to the difficulties faced by young people struggling to separate from domineering parents.

Hurst’s emphasis on family issues reminds us that, although *Lummox* is in many ways an experimental text, it is at heart a domestic novel. However, instead of celebrating the popular “Angel of the House,” the devoted, self-sacrificing wife-and-mother who often served as the center of nineteenth-century family and story, the moral center of Hurst’s narrative is a poverty-stricken unwed mother who, after being forced to give up her own son for adoption, becomes a mother-substitute for a series of dysfunctional. Hurst grants Bertha a happy ending that hints at the possibility of a long-term loving relationship and her own “forever family.” Although some readers and critics might consider this contrived, as Abe Ravitz observes, such an ending is consistent with many of Hurst’s narratives: “Hurst’s ‘grim=kind’ portraits of humanity, springing from an essentially Darwinist universe, accepted the struggle for existence but tempered pessimism with a romantic reliance on conscience and hope for change” (38).

*Lummox* is structured as a series of set pieces describing Bertha’s experiences as a live-in cook and domestic worker. With only a little editing, each episode could stand alone as an independent novella. Bertha’s employers include the Farleys, whose poet-son rapes and impregnates her; the Musliners, newlyweds who have not consummated their marriage because of the wife’s terror of sex; the Wallensteins, whose son is torn between love of his mother’s Jewish faith and his sexual passion for his Christian wife, and the Oessetrichs, a family whose overbearing mother is destroying the lives of her adult daughters. In between these live-in jobs, Bertha returns to the sailors’ boarding house in lower Manhattan where she grew up and again plays a
maternal role in, *inter alia*, the lives of a young Scandinavian sailor dying alone and far from home and a vulnerable Italian-American teenager whom she saves from a destructive path of promiscuity and probable prostitution.

*Lummox* spans the years from Bertha’s birth in the late 1880s through the beginning of the decade still referred to as the “Roaring Twenties.” But Bertha is no boyish, gamin-like 1920s flapper and her poverty, passivity, and, most strikingly, her large, white, ponderous body set her apart from the likes of a Daisy Buchanan or Lily Bart. Indeed, Bertha is not a woman of any specific generation; Hurst’s original intention to name her protagonist “Saga” signals the author’s desire to create an epic character who supersedes time and place (Thompson 165). The name “Saga” is derived from the Old Norse word for “seeing one,” suggesting that Bertha is to be considered something more than a mere “lump,” as one of her co-workers refers to her. Bertha’s insights are neither intellectual nor articulate. Instead, they are intuitive, instinctive—and frequently accurate.

Bertha’s ethnic background is never firmly established, and Hurst variously suggests it is German, Scandinavian, Polish, or Baltic. The name “Bertha” itself is of Germanic origin. Although its root means “bright” or “famous,” Hurst’s readers during the 1920s would more likely have identified it with *Dicke Bertha*—literally, fat (or heavy) Bertha, thus connecting Hurst’s “big” Bertha with Big Bertha, the nickname given to the howitzer used by the German army during World War I. Hurst does not explore this connection, simply associating her Bertha with a large and gross body type. This is reinforced by the repeated use of the taunt “Squarehead,” an insulting slur against German- and Scandinavian-Americans that is often directed against Bertha.
Bertha’s position as a woman who exists outside any particular era is reinforced by Hurst’s striking lack of reference to contemporary events. In one brief scene, she does describe Bertha caught in the middle of a crowd celebrating Theodore Roosevelt’s triumphant return from an African expedition, an actual event that took place in Manhattan in June 1910. In the novel, however, the scene is important only because Bertha is standing in the street where her son lives with his adoptive parents. As she wrestles with the decision of whether or not to look up at the window from which the boy is watching the parade, the excitement of the event itself means nothing to her. By the time “she had found the strength to look…the heads [in the window] were withdrawn and someone was jerking down a shade…Her boy shining up there in the window. Her boy upon whose face she had not dared to look” (173).

The only extended episode in which contemporary events do figure prominently takes place in the narrative about the Oessetrich family. I discuss Hurst’s bitter satire of nativist excess among World War I home-front efforts in Chapter 2; in general, however, Lummox is remarkably laconic about events taking place in the greater world. Hurst’s lack of interest in incorporating the major events of the day into her narrative is perhaps best reflected in a scene in which Bertha sits in a park in lower Manhattan reading the “help wanted” ads: “The dread of starting those rounds. Help Wanted, Female…The city ran past her. Dived into subway hoods. Clamored over cobbles. Honked, whizzed, banged. Park Row had just spewed out a red-hot edition and the newsboys’ howls ran high (149). The cries of the newsboys about world events mean nothing to her. Bertha’s only concern is to find work and avoid homelessness.
If Hurst is not particularly concerned here with current events, she is concerned with the immediate effects of poverty on the lives of women and how it is manifested in terms of food and housing instability, inadequate health care, and financial and sexual exploitation. During the six years Bertha works for the wealthy and philanthropic Farleys, for example, she sleeps in a tiny room “cowed under the roof of the finely austere house in Gramercy Park beneath a slant ceiling that was like a threatening slap.” There was:

[n]o heat unless she left the door open and the warm breath of downstairs came up. A bed with a short fourth leg and a spring that sagged like a hammock to the considerable heft of Bertha’s body. A bureau rigged up out of a discarded desk…and a pitcher and bowl on a soap box. For six years Bertha slept up there with that slanting ceiling on her chest. But usually she was so very tired that her sleep was like a death and the slant a clod of earth on the grave of another day.

(6)

Bertha’s bedroom is so lacking in the basic amenities that even Hurst’s sentences describing the room lack verbs: “A bed with a short fourth leg…A bureau rigged up out of a discarded desk…”. The family’s charity work is situated in ironic juxtaposition to Bertha’s living quarters in an ironic aside in which Hurst explains that the philanthropic Mrs. Farley “was…on the letterhead of an organization called The Circle for Housing Relief” (6).

The room at the Farleys is dismal but it is better than anything Bertha has lived in before. Growing up in Annie Wennerberg’s sailors’ lodging house, “[s]he slept on a cot that crawled with vermin” (3). When, raped and pregnant, she returns to the only home
she has ever known, Annie charges her former ward “fifteen cents the night on the
carpet-covered sofa” (47)—and, although Bertha does unpaid domestic work for her
foster mother, she must pay Annie an additional five cents for a cup of coffee. When
she is still a young woman, Bertha can always find some kind of employment. The aging
Bertha, however, is increasingly unable to find even the most menial daily work. When
she leaves the Oessetrichs, she discovers that Annie and her lodging house have
disappeared and is reduced to living “a cubby-hole of a filthy tenement” (290). Even
worse, she often goes hungry:

The quick lunch rooms, even the meanest of them, made heavy inroads on the
day’s pay. At best they were dreadful, fume-fogged places, where the fried foods
clung to the cold plates on rims of grease and the coffee was the color and
consistency of clay-bank. Often it seemed to Bertha that it simply would not go
down. The warm slush of it in her mouth. To close the eyes and gulp until the
tears sprang, accomplished it. It was easier to bear than the knife-pangs of
hunger which could come slashing down on Bertha. They cut her in two. Bertha
dreaded hunger. It made her shamble when she walked. It lifted the top of her
head. It cut. (293)

Typical of Hurst’s narrative style throughout the social-justice sections of the text,
this scene is told in the voice of a detached third-person narrator and filled with realistic
images expressed in straightforward declarative sentences. Hurst avoids unusual or
overly intellectual words; indeed, only one word in this paragraph (“consistency”)
contains more than three syllables. Hurst continues to experiment with her use of verbs,
occasionally eliminating them altogether—“The warm slush of it in her mouth”—or
inverting the noun-verb order of a sentence—“To close the eyes and gulp until the tears sprang, accomplished it.”

Food and housing insecurity are not the only aspects of poverty that Bertha must endure. Her jobs are often filthy and sometimes disgusting: “Corners to be scraped out with a knife. Scrub water that became livid. Stench. Two men had sickened at the job and quit. Yet Bertha, with her lips held very tightly it is true, scraped and scraped…” (3). Sexual harassment, including rape, is a daily concern for poor working women; “[a]t eight, Bertha had worn a hat pin under her waist against the bestiality of lodgers” (47). Perhaps it is this memory that impels her to rescue Chita, a young boarding-house slavey, who she discovers in a closet with a “young Italian sailor off a fruit ship” (143). Bertha averts the seduction and turns Chita over to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. We meet Chita again later in the novel, a recent graduate of a training program for milliners who “has developed from a pinched little undersized waif…into a young woman who is prepared to take up her place in the world with dignity and self-respect” (242). Bertha observes her graduation from the training program from another room and no natural mother could be as proud of her child’s accomplishment.

Throughout all the challenges of her life, Bertha remains silent, passive, accepting, and uncomplaining. The outcry against the unfair treatment of domestic workers is told in the voice of Helga, the Swedish immigrant who is Bertha’s only friend. Helga longs for material luxury and beautiful things. She goes to work in a brothel, hoping this will provide an easier way of life, eventually returning to domestic work and joining Bertha as a maid in the Oessetrichs’ home. In an impassioned speech, Helga cries out against the indignities the working poor must endure:
I'm back. I'm the servant problem again. The problem without a chance…

Why we ain’t even got organization. The hod carriers got that much. We can’t tell the truth about the kitchen side of the door, because we ain’t got the voice of organization. What’s the answer? The women who hire us call us an ungrateful lot and who is there to answer back? Me? I got a fat chance getting listened to, ain’t I? Ungrateful! Ungrateful for what? That's what I want to know…

What do they know about us, except that we are fourteen-hour-a-day machines that mustn’t balk or break down, or we get ungrateful? Ungrateful for what? Oh, God, tell me what? Ungrateful because my life is chained to a sink…I’m like a kid sleeping on the floor. I can’t fall outta bed because there is no place to fall. See? That’s me. I lose if I win. There’s a helluva lot of fun in a game like that. I lose if I win. (220-221)

Helga does not share Bertha’s robust constitution. Unable to get medical treatment for her “floatin’ kidney,” she eventually becomes to ill to work and dies in the charity ward of a public hospital. Bertha’s own promise of a happy ending comes in the form of Mr. Meyerbogen, a widower with four children, who invites her to join his family. His words are sincere, if unromantic: “It ain’t easy to find such a woman like you. The children, they like you…I need a woman. You. We would treat you like one of the family” (326).

“Its thwarted life, its mighty hunger, its unfinished work”

Helga’s call to action on behalf of the working poor and Bertha’s ultimate self-actualization through music have antecedents in nineteenth-century American social-reform novels. A comparison between *Lummox* and Rebecca Harding Davis's 1861
“Life in the Iron-Mills” reveals a number of striking parallels between the way the authors discuss the effect of unrestrained capitalism and industrialization on the lives of workers. Davis’s Deborah and Hugo are also exploited workers who live in desperate poverty. One character in each narrative—Bertha in *Lummox* and Hugo in “Life in the Iron-Mills”—yearns for aesthetic expression and one character—Helga and Hugo—dies. The authors grant Bertha and Deborah hope for future happiness, although the reader realizes it might well have been otherwise.

Hugo Wolfe is an immigrant laborer who, in the same way as Helga, dares to question his lot in life. His cousin Deborah is a hunchback who shares a squalid basement room with Hugo and his father. Although Hugo is a sensitive man in many ways, he is totally oblivious to the fact that Deborah is in love with him. He seeks self-expression by creating “hideous, fantastic enough, but sometimes strangely beautiful” sculptures out of korl, those “great heaps of the refuse from the ore after the pig-metal is run…a light, porous substance, of a delicate, waxen, flesh-colored tinge” (2605). Hugo’s co-workers mock his artistic efforts, calling him “Molly Wolfe” and “one of the girl-men” (2605). During an inspection tour, the mill owner and several guests suddenly come upon one of Hugo’s sculptures, “the white figure of a woman…of giant proportions, crouching on the ground, her arms flung out in some wild gesture of warning” (2608):

> There was not one line of beauty or grace in it: a nude woman’s form, muscular, grown coarse with labor, the powerful limbs instinct with some one poignant longing. One idea: there it was in the tense, rigid muscles, the clothing hands, the wild, eager face, like that of a starving wolf’s. (2609)
When one of the visitors asks about the sculpture’s meaning, Hugo pauses for a moment and then responds, “She be hungry.” Told that the body is too strong to be that of a starving woman, he replies tersely:

"Not hungry for meat."

“What then? Whiskey?’…

Wolfe was silent for a moment, thinking.

“I dunno,” he said, with a bewildered look. “It mebbe. Summat to make her live, I think,—like you. Whiskey ull do it, in a way.” (2609)

A more sensitive member of the visiting party sees something more in the korl woman’s face: “It asks questions of God, and says, ‘I have a right to know.’ Good God, how hungry it is!” The mill owner dismisses Hugo’s effort: “I have no fancy for nursing infant geniuses. I suppose there are some stray gleams of mind and soul among these wretches. The Lord will take care of his own; or else they can work out their own salvation…I wash my hands of all social problems” (2610).

Later that evening, Deborah tells Hugo that she has stolen a wallet belonging to one of the visitors. The two are caught and sent to jail, where Hugo commits suicide. After her release, Deborah joins a Quaker community. In the story’s ambiguous ending, the narrator reveals that he or she lives in the family’s original dwelling and still possesses the statue of the korl woman, kept hidden in the library of the home.

The worlds of “Life in the Iron-Mills” and *Lummox* are separated by geography and generation, but not by the tragedies of the poor. Just as the korl woman is literally carved out of discarded iron ore, Bertha is figuratively carved out of a pile of human refuse. The yearnings of both the sculpted woman and the living one are summed up in
Hugo's phrase: “She be hungry” (2609). Hugo and Bertha also have much in common. Although they live in the United States, their cultural roots are closer to those of Europe. Like many iron workers, Hugo is of Welsh descent; as for Bertha:

Nobody quite knew just what Baltic bloods flowed in sullen and alien rivers through Bertha’s veins…There must have been a good smattering of Scandinavian and even a wide streak of western Teutonic. Slav, too. Because unaccountably she found herself knowing the Polish national anthem.

Recognized it with her heart as it rattled out of a hurdy-gurdy. (1)

Both are illegitimate, Hugo born “in vice” (2605) and Bertha the daughter “[o]f no particular father…and of a dead mother” (1). Throughout their lives, they are poorly housed, poorly fed, poorly clothed, and poorly educated. Both work at filthy and often dangerous jobs and lack legal or union protection. Yet both are capable of love. Hugo loves Janey, a young neighbor who often stays in the basement room with him, his father, and his jealous cousin. Bertha loves the son she is forced to give up for adoption and never loses her physical longing for him: “To the pain of that empty cove of her arm where the small head had lain she had done horrid, unmentionable things. Sunk her teeth into the yearning flesh of it, leaving an inflamed crescent the shape of her bite” (62).

There are important differences between the two characters as well. Unlike Bertha, Hugo is conscious of his low social status. He understands that there are people of wealth and position in the world and seize “eagerly every chance that brought him into contact with this mysterious class that shone down on him perpetually with the glamour of another order of being. What made the difference between them? That was
the mystery of his life” (2606). Bertha, on the other hand, is passive and uncomplaining, “a dray horse that’s so used to pullin’ she can’t feel the harness,” as Helga describes her (31). By the time he dies, Hugo’s life and soul have been destroyed; as noted, Hurst gifts Bertha with a sentimental ending that offers hope for a happy and stable future.

Davis and Hurst share a sense of immediacy and a visual quality that enables the reader to envision the scene as they read. However, no one would confuse Davis’s straightforward description of Hugo’s and Deborah’s lives—“incessant labor, sleeping in kennel-like rooms, eating rank pork and molasses, drinking—God and the distillers only know what….” (2601)—with the exaggerated metaphor Hurst uses in her description of Bertha’s life at the sailors’ lodging house: “She slept on a cot that crawled with vermin, with the beauty of repose on that face of hers which was said to look like the sound of a clump of dirt on a coffin” (3).

One of the most significant differences between the texts is the difference between the two narrators. Davis makes use of a first-person narrator who speaks directly to the reader at the beginning and the end of the story but is absent from the middle of the text. She (or he—Davis gives no hint of the narrator’s gender) enters directly into the text early in the first paragraph. Following a description of the thick air of “a town of iron-works… clammy with the breath of crowded human beings” (2599), the narrator immediately makes it clear that she is not one of this mob of “crowded human beings,” dismissing them with the comment, “It stifles me” (2599). A detached narrator in every sense of the word, she does not interact with the townspeople and observes them through a window of her home. The only personal information she provides is that she lives in the same house in which the cousins lived more than thirty years before.
Susan Amper suggests that the elderly Deborah is the narrator, telling the story of her thwarted love for Hugo. However, I consider the narrator’s language too elegant for the uneducated Deborah. Whoever the narrator is—and the reader is never certain—her or his presence adds an element of mystery and ambiguity to an already-fascinating narrative.

Most of *Lummox*, on the other hand, is told in the voice of a detached, omniscient third-person narrator who has deep and profoundly sensitive insight into Bertha’s thoughts and feelings, even those the inarticulate woman herself barely understands. Unlike the narrator in “Life in the Iron-Mills,” the narrator in *Lummox* never acknowledges the presence of the reader; her relationship is with Bertha, to whom she speaks directly at moments of the greatest emotional intensity. The novel reaches its climax in the scene in which Bertha buys a standing-room ticket to a performance by the brilliant young pianist who, unbeknownst to her, is her son. The narrator speaks directly to Bertha: “You could see a little, if you tiptoed to peer between the heads…Someone rammed in ahead, pressing you there against the wall…You could feel the floor of sand moving out subtly from under your feet. The floor that led under the sea…” (308). The next scene shifts to another illustration of workplace discrimination against aging workers and the author returns to her voice of realistic, third-person narration.

**Anatomy of Me**

In spite of these stylistic differences, there are important similarities between the texts. Both Davis and Hurst use the bodies of poor women to signify the difference between their characters’ innermost longings and the harsh reality of their lives. In
addition, by portraying the negative way in which middle-class characters respond to the physical presence of the poor, both authors encourage their own middle-class readers to consider their personal prejudices. When the narrator of "Life in the Iron-Mills" reveals that she keeps the statue of the korl woman hidden "behind a curtain" in her home, she claims she keeps it out of sight because "it is such a rough, ungainly thing" (2624). She then immediately confesses her real reason for keeping the statue hidden:

"Sometimes—to-night, for instance—the curtain is accidentally drawn back, and I see a bare arm stretched out imploringly in the darkness, and an eager, wolfish face watching mine: a wan, woful (sic) face, through which the spirit of the dead korl-cutter looks out, with its thwarted life, its mighty hunger, its unfinished work" (2624). The narrator’s real fear is more likely that the korl woman would remind the townspeople of America’s injustices against the working poor—ironically, the very act of revelation that Davis is performing through her text.

Hurst also uses the image of the female body to express both her social-justice and aesthetic themes. Just as Davis underscores the commodification of workers in America’s aggressively capitalistic culture, Hurst uses realistic descriptions of women’s bodies to demonstrate how capitalists who control the labor market exploit the working poor. Bertha’s large, powerful body is Hugo’s kohl woman brought to life. As a young woman, she uses her body to perform even the most demeaning tasks willingly and capably. As time passes, however, Bertha realizes she is aging and can no longer work as hard as she once did. She first goes into denial—"[t]he years were at her, but she called it neck-ache and bought a bottle of liniment" (216). As it becomes increasingly
difficult for her to find anything other than occasional work, she faces starvation and despair.

Bertha is consistently described as awkward and ponderous, a “[g]reat silent clod” of a woman (49). Her inner sense of self, however, is far different and it too is portrayed in terms of the body: “Her body was like a white fog, surrounding the imperviousness of her…That, too, was why she could scrape drain holes to a sense of goldy rhythm” (49). Most important, two aesthetically pure creations come directly from the “white fog” of her body—“The Cathedral under the Sea,” Rollo Farley’s masterpiece, written in a white heat after his only night with Bertha, and the son they conceive together.

Helga, who hates the squalor of domestic labor, is also portrayed in terms of a woman’s body. “Pretty, pretty Helga, with her brown hair frizzed and her face full of pink light from the sateen kimono” (181) expresses her cries for the unionization of domestic workers in terms of physicality, arguing that “[t]hose that got the drudgery to do get the hard beds to sleep on. Those whose bones are rested from easy living get the soft beds—where’s the right of it, I ask you?” (30). Later, she uses her body in a different way and goes to work in a brothel. She dismisses Bertha’s offers of help, saying, “I won’t be saved, if that’s what’s on your mind…Saved for what? Saved for going back to scrubbing somebody’s pots and pans in somebody’s kitchen? That’s a helluva life, ain’t it, to want to be saved for?” (189). Nevertheless, although the aging Bertha remains healthy, Helga’s body betrays her. Her death in a charity ward also underscores Hurst’s subtle commentary about the lack of adequate health care available to the poor.
For a while, at least, Helga does seem to accept the dehumanization that accompanies her work in the sex trade and enjoys the pretty material things such work provides. When she finally admits that she is repulsed by her job as a prostitute and can no longer tolerate the “wet slippery mouths” of her customers (190) and the bodies of the men she services, Bertha helps her find her a job with the Oesetrichs. Once there, she begins to lose both her spirit and her youthful looks, “[a]s the pretty sheen to her hair dulled and the tips of her fingers began to spread and the nails to break, her eyes sort of dimmed, as if two little lamps had been hurried out of them…” (219). Helga then begins to use her body in a different way, employing her hands less for housework than for pilfering the family’s material possessions to obtain the little luxuries she longs for.

Another example of Hurst’s use of the trope of woman’s-body-as-commodity is found in the Musliner episode. A newly married couple, “[t]he Musliners were kind” (62). Mr. Musliner, in particular, is loving and generous, but it is clear that his young wife is desperate to avoid any intimate contact with him. She seeks refuge in Bertha’s room one night and explains that theirs is a marriage of convenience undertaken for financial reasons. In the same way that Helga is repulsed by her customers, Mrs. Musliner is repulsed by her husband’s body: “I shouldn’t ever have done it. They forced me. My father—family—money—he’s so brown, Bertha—so terribly brown—brown lips—so good and so brown and so terrible” (80). Bertha first comforts the terrified young woman. Later, she delivers her to her husband’s bedroom, thereby enabling the consummation of the marriage. Some years later, Bertha sees the couple and their two young sons outside Carnegie Hall. Mrs. Musliner is no longer a frightened young woman. She looks “as snug as a plover and as plump. Sweet fleshed. Something
eueptic about her” (306). The contented wife does not recognize the aging women standing next to her. When she realizes that one of their sons “had his face crushed up softly” against Bertha’s worn-out coat, Mrs. Musliner physically separates her child’s body from that of the poor woman. Sliding “a quick hand between his cheek and the contact,” she says, “‘Ugh, darling, not nice’” (306). She has come to accept physical intimacy with her husband but repulses any invasion of the privacy of the middle-class family unit by the body of the poor.

Abe Ravitz interprets this episode differently. Although he acknowledges that Mr. Musliner is a “‘good man,’” Ravitz stresses that “he is sexually abhorrent to his much younger, repressed wife ardently in love with someone else” (111). Calling their marriage “morally corrupt” (111), he accuses Bertha of “valuing the secure over the sensual, caritas over eros…” (112) and claims that “Bertha/Mother’s well-meaning complicity is depicted, not Erna’s torture” (112). I suggest, however, that Bertha’s role in this episode is consistent with her behavior throughout the narrative and that her interventions lead to stability—and sometimes genuine love—for people who otherwise would have been socially and economically marginalized and who would not have been able to care for themselves—the type of social outcast that Bertha herself is in danger of becoming.


Hurst uses an observational style to describe Bertha at work or seeking employment: “Odds and ends of jobs. For months she resumed the night work in the Equitable Building…When she had saved ten dollars she started in at the agencies
again. The rows of mornings in the rows of chairs...She changed places so frequently and the more she shifted about, of course, the more she yielded in commissions. On again. Off again" (57-58). Hurst’s literary style changes when she describes inarticulate longing for self-expression through music. Now the author’s words are more expressive, more metaphoric, and more emotional, as well as more often directed toward Bertha.

Hurst regularly describes Bertha’s body in terms of a close association with the earth. Her “churning, spatulate toes” repeatedly seek comfort and expression from “[h]er mysterious friend, the soil” (73). Her first moment of ecstatic abandon to the music within her takes place during a lavish picnic given by the Musliners. Bertha is serving lunch to the guests when an organ grinder begins to play a “folk song out of Ukrainia.” Suddenly, she begins to dance:

Hands broad on haunches and little bulge of bacchanalian belly—Yeow—squat heels deep in turf, arms flung wide and half wrenched from sockets!...Sing, peasant, sing, and swing the grinning scythe! Sing of the strong fertilizing soil and the dung heaps that steam and the crones that are wise with old lore and the women who love, and who bear, and who weep...Sing—Yeow—of meat and of soil and of strength and of love—sing Yeow! Yeow! Yeow! (74)

In this scene, Bertha’s inner self comes to life and connects her to her roots. She does not speak; it is through dance, that combination of body and music, that Bertha expresses the joys and sorrows, the knowledge and pain, of women throughout the generations. Her only word is a sound that comes from deep within her that is neither a cry of pain nor a cry of joy: “Yeow!” It is an expression of oneness with the earth, of climax and release, but it is ultimately unfulfilling. A fellow servant mocks her and Bertha
returns home feeling as though her body has been drained and is now "so empty. As if all the strength had run out through her fingers and toes. A flask that had been drained of wine, that for years and years had been beating against its sides" (75).

Bertha's musicality is also expressed through the repeated image of the chimes, a trope Hurst introduces within the first few paragraphs of the narrative. The chimes are connected to a kind of secret insight that Bertha possesses, "knowledges that came to her in chimes from the dark forests within her...Secrets that shimmered." Hurst makes it clear that Bertha is unable to express this knowledge in words: "...it seemed to Bertha that her tongue was merely the shallow pan for those few words at her disposal which rattled off it so hollowly. It was so hard to talk. Words. Frail beasts of burden that crashed down to their knees under what she wanted to say" (2). Hurst repeats the trope of the chimes throughout the text in a series of variations on "the messages of the chimes, goldily" (28). In particular, she uses it with reference to Bertha's son, as when Bertha holds him for the first time and sees "[t]he music of the chimes goldily tranced in his eyes" (55). They also represent the "inner secret solaces that rest in the lovely grail of the spirit" that enable her to perform even the lowest and harshest of work without being degraded herself, to "pull webby stuffs out of drainpipes to the sound of chimes goldily..." (82).

The "jeweled sands" is another trope Hurst uses to describe Bertha's frustrated desire to express her deepest emotions. Other such images include "frozen tears," "flamingoes on wing," and "jeweled words." She combines several of these tropes in the scene in which Bertha, "bursting of music," tries to communicate her feelings to Rollo Farley:
…her dark forest was full of chimes. Words darted through the branches with the brilliancy of flamingoes on wing…Brooks of the frozen tears of her loneliness began to flow. She was bursting of music and the sound of the jeweled words and she wanted to run after him and help him somehow into the largo of the charmed forest of her heart. (13)

These images appear again in the description of Bertha’s emotions when she reads “The Cathedral under the Sea”: “Slow oxen words plowing up secrets of the soil. Gleaming submarine words. Words out of jeweled sands…the song that was locked in a heart and hurt there…The brook of the frozen tears thawing upon Rollo’s lips. The flamingoes flying—“ (20).

Music is clearly an important part of Bertha’s heritage. As a child, she “unaccountably she found herself knowing the Polish national anthem. Recognized it with her heart as it rattled out of a hurdy-gurdy” (1). Her only inheritance is a carpetbag that includes “a bit of Bulgarian embroidery, a runic brooch, a concertina with a punctured bellows, and an ikon in imitation mosaic. Old world” (1). Through a series of coincidences, she arranges for her son to receive the concertina as a birthday gift. This loving gesture is another of Bertha’s life-changing interventions, because it starts the young boy “to fumbling out tunes all day on the piano” (193) and leads to the music lessons that will help him develop his extraordinary talent.

Bertha is a synesthete, a woman whose subconscious thoughts and emotions bypass words and translate directly into musical expression. Hurst’s greatest achievement in Lummox is to reify the old expression that music exists where words cannot go by actually turning the words in her text into musical notation. This takes
place late in the narrative in the scene in which Bertha buys a standing-room ticket to a piano recital at Carnegie Hall. Although she does not realize the performer is her son, she is attracted to the concert by a poster showing a photograph of a young man seated at a piano, with “[s]uch ineffably tender hands…and…eyes that looked tranced with the music of the chimes goldily” (307). Crushed against the back wall of the upper balcony, Bertha finally achieves a sustained moment of internal peace and fulfillment. As Bertha listens to the man who is both an extraordinary musical talent and her son, Hurst brings these tropes together for the last time. Speaking directly to her character, Hurst depicts the fulfillment of Bertha’s longing:

It seeped down the keys in heartbeats. You could scarcely keep back. You know that cry. It had lain in your heart for so long. There is was on the outside of yourself, strewn along the keys. You were free of the hurt of it—where it had lodged like a knife in the plushy case of your heart.

The bleeding out of all the little inner turmoils. The damned-up ecstasies.

The music of the chimes goldily. The glad releases. The rilling beauty. The white hands at your heart. (309)

At this point, Hurst abandons words entirely and presents her text in the form of three unidentified musical citations. The first is an excerpt from a piano transcription of Beethoven’s Violin Sonata No. 9, also known as the Kreutzer Sonata (1803). The second is from Chopin’s Nocturne in D-flat Major (Opus 27, No. 2) (1836), commonly regarded as one of the composer’s finest pieces for solo piano. The third is an excerpt from a piano transcription of the Bruch Violin Concerto (1866). Hurst provides no explanation as to why she has introduced these three particular selections into her text.
Through her examples of evolving musical styles, she may be making a subtle authorial comment about the changes in literary style that took place during her lifetime, during which critical approbation shifted away from the structured, realistic narratives of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in favor of the emerging modernist movement. Alternatively, the musical selections may represent stages in Bertha’s life, in which the Beethoven reflects the longing of youth, the Chopin speaks directly to Bertha’s long-suppressed emotions, “[a]s if the melodies of her heart were arteries and that running of the keys out there the precious bleeding of them” (308), and the Bruch provides a coda that hints at the happy ending that will take place when Bertha meets the Meyerbogens.

Hurst often intertwines the modernist style of her aesthetic narrative with the realism of her social-justice text. When Bertha serves at a dinner party given by Mrs. Oessetrich, a family friend entertains by singing an operating aria. Hurst first presents this scene with a realistic description: “One evening there was to be a new opera. Madam Gerbhardt had the score. She sang snatches of it at dinner, and before the wraps were brought, she sat down at the concert grand piano in the drawing-room and played off pages of it. Coq D’Or. Ticking golden nonsense” (275). In the next paragraph, Hurst switches to her modernist style and speaks directly to Bertha as she describes her character’s visceral response to the music:

Oh, but you wanted to strut and stick yourself out in front like a fat king and hold off the gold platter with the excavated mound of pistachio pudding and rollick with it as if you had stepped down off a playing card. Fat, mad king…It made you merry and it made you foolish and it made you see the new-fangled
bewilderment of a sky the color of a bruise…Tra-la-la-la-lalalala. Lawk, you had almost stumbled with the solid gold platter of the pistachio. (275-276)

In the progression from objective description to expressing literary narrative in musical notation, Hurst employs modernist techniques that are reflective of the experimentation of her contemporaries Gertrude Stein and James Joyce. Critics have long made the association between Hurst’s “repetitive, simplistic, yet poetic” approach to _Lummox_ and Stein’s style (Thompson 167). Noting that Hurst’s contemporary Heywood Broun was among critics who found “stylistic evocations” of Stein throughout _Lummox_, Thompson adds that “Broun consciously places Hurst in a modernist lineage—notably a female one—and rates the offspring of Stein as more important than Stein herself, a perception obviously altered by later literary history, which erases Hurst as part of any modernist tradition” (162).

Stein is a challenging role model to live up to. Bernard Fay writes that Stein’s “sentences, her words, her thoughts, her rhythms are all based upon the present without fear or provocation” (xiv). Speaking of her 1934 novel _The Making of Americans_, he comments that Stein “has not given up herself to the childish faith in the possibility of killing the word and creating something else…because words with all their softness and humility signify this universal fate which rules over everything: beginnings, ends and repetitions” (xvii). Stein’s unique literary style is dense, convoluted, and characterized by lengthy and repetitive sentences. Her routine use of the present tense situates her text within an eternal present that is reinforced by her frequent use of words ending in “ing,” the participles, gerunds, and gerundives that shut out past and future possibilities, as when she writes:
Every one has in them always their own repeating, always more and more then repeating gives to everyone who feels it in them a more certain feeling about them, a more secure feeling in living. Repeating is more and more in everyone the whole of that one the whole of every one, the wonder of each one is always more and more complete in each one as the repeating in them makes them a sure thing a thing certainly having being, makes for every one old men’s and old women’s wisdom, old men’s loving and old women’s feeling. *Americans* 163

The emphasis in this paragraph is on the word “repeating,” which Stein uses four times, and supports with words such as “feeling,” “living,” “having been,” and “loving.” Taken together, they provide the text with a strong sense of rhythm. Stein’s prose can be overwhelming, trapping the reader within the variations of an endless literary fugue that allows for neither forward direction nor exit. Even a champion of her writing such as Fay admits that Stein’s style “might appear to some people as monotonous and subtle at the same time” (xvi).

Hurst resists the temptation to imitate Stein’s use of participles, gerunds, and gerundives. Her characteristic stylistic idiosyncrasy involves converting nouns and adjectives into adverbs. Although sometimes forced and awkward—a cynic might describe this style as “Hurstly”—these neologisms often successfully communicate meaning to the reader. One example is Hurst’s description of Mr. Musliner’s embarrassment when Bertha discovers him alone and dejected because his wife has once again sexually rebuffed him: “[H]e jumped up redly” (63). The fading beauty of the wife of another employer is described as “suggestive of blondely loose fat” (82) and still another middle-aged woman is “about forty and had let that forty come, grayly” (180).
Even when Hurst’s neologisms miss the mark and are amusing in their awkwardness, they consistently make their point.

Both Hurst and Stein use repetition to emphasize their themes, as in Hurst’s “music of the chimes, goldily” and Stein’s “repeating” in the example from *The Making of Americans*. This lends a rhythmic musicality to their texts; Fay’s comment that Stein’s “ideas do not begin and end abruptly… They come as a musical theme, they haunt the mind as a refrain” (xvi) can be applied as well to Hurst’s style in *Lummox*.

Another interesting modernist connection can be made between Hurst’s use of music in *Lummox* and James Joyce’s similar experiment in the “Sirens” chapter of his 1922 novel *Ulysses*. In a discussion of this episode, Jon Green writes that of “all the crossovers in the history of arts interrelationships…none has captured the imagination of recent novelists like the marriage of literature and music” (489). He cites Walter Pater’s “provocative” claim that “‘every form of art is perpetually aspiring to the condition of music’” and argues that “[t]he move to musical analogies not only revealed the modern writer’s attraction to a medium that promised to endow the written word with ineffable magic, but it also betrayed a growing disenchantment with the limitations of verbal discourse itself” (489). Other writers make use of scenes in which their characters experience important personal transformations while listening to music; examples include E.M. Forester’s *Howard’s End* (1910) and Virginia Woolf’s “The String Quartet” (1920). Joyce and Hurst, however, are among the few who made a sustained attempt to move beyond words and into music itself.

Although *Ulysses* is one of the most complex works of literature in history, its plot is relatively simple: Mr. Leopold Bloom goes for a walk in Dublin one day while his wife
Molly has a tryst with another man. Joyce elevates Bloom’s seriocomic meanderings to an epic scale and creates episodes that parallel those in Homer’s classic narrative about the hero Odysseus’ return home after the Trojan War. Joyce’s “Sirens” chapter alludes to an episode in Book XII of *The Odyssey* in which the sorceress Circe advises the hero about the perils he will encounter during his next adventure and warns him: “Race straight past that coast!” (Book 23, line 60).

Joyce sets this episode “Sirens” at 4:00 p.m. on June 16, 1904 in the bar of the Ormond Hotel. Bloom is seated apart from a group of men who are unaware that he can overhear their songs and conversations. Blazes Boylan, his wife’s lover, stops by for a moment, en route to his tryst with Molly. Other Dubliners of Bloom’s acquaintance come into the bar to have a drink and joke around with their friends, flirt with the barmaids, and sing a variety of songs.

According to the early Joyce scholar Stuart Gilbert, in this episode Joyce moves beyond any previous literary attempt to adapt musical technique to prose. Gilbert suggests that the “Sirens” chapter is written in the form of a *fuga per canonem*, a kind of “formal fugue” or contrapunatal composition in which two or more voices join in singing a series themes and variations. Joyce’s theme, Gilbert writes, “is rarely simple; there are generally two, three or four overlapping parts, which, synchronized by intertwinment in the same sentence, or closely juxtaposed, produce the effect of a chord of music” (252). In this episode:

…the musical rhythm, the sonority and counterpoint of the prose are evocative of the theme itself, the Sirens’ ‘song of enthrallment.’ This episode differs from most examples of ‘musical prose’ in that the meaning does not lose but is, rather,
intensified by the combination of the two arts; sense is not sacrificed to sound but the two are so harmonized that, unless his ears...are sealed with wax against the spell, the reader, hearkening to ‘the voice sweet as the honeycomb and having joy thereof, will go on his way the wiser’ (257).

Because of the great wealth of detail that Joyce provides—Green cites Zack Bowen’s estimate that the “Sirens” chapter contains more than 158 references to forty-seven individual pieces of music (qtd. Green 490)—my focus is limited to the elements that most directly relate to Hurst’s text. One irony that both texts share is that, although they are so closely involved with music, both authors use color imagery as their principal trope. In Joyce, this color imagery is associated with the two young barmaids who represent the Sirens. The Misses Lydia Douce and Miss Minna Kennedy are at once flirtatious, charming, and malicious. In the same way Hurst associates the adverb “goldily” with the music of the chimes, Joyce consistently associates the barmaids with the colors bronze and gold, a reference to a scene in Book 21 of The Odyssey. He introduces these images in the chapter’s introductory section, which can appear disjoined on first reading, much like the varied sounds of an orchestra tuning up before it begins to play:

Bronze by gold heard the hoof irons, steelyringing...
Horrid! And gold flushed more...
Goldpinnacled hair...
Peep! Who’s in the….peepogold?...
Tink cried to bronze in pity...
Bonzelydia by Minagold...
By bronze, by gold, in ocean green of shadow…

Where bronze from anear? Where gold from afar? (210-211)

Once the tune-up is completed, the formal “musical composition” begins as Joyce describes the barmaids looking out of a window. The young women are identified with an associated color: “Bronze by gold, Miss Douce’s head by Miss Kennedy’s head, over the cross blind of the Ormond bar heard the viceregal hoofs go by, ringing steel” (211). As the scene continues, the author continues to identify them by their colors, not their names:

“Look at the fellow in the tall silk.”


“In the second carriage, Miss Douce’s wet lips said…Mind till I see.

“She darted, bronze, to the back most corner (211).

Soon after this, Leopold Bloom walks past their window. The young women mock him as “greasy eyes! Imagine being married to a man like that!” (214), driving each other to greater and greater heights of hysterical laughter. Joyce repeats the association with bronze and gold and also includes some other phrases introduced earlier: “In a giggling peal young gold bronze voices blended…They threw young heads back, bronze gigglegold, to let freely their laughter…high piercing notes (213)… Shrill, with deep laughter, after, gold after bronze, they urged each other to peal after peal, ringing in changes, bronzegold, goldbronze, shrill deep, to laughter after laughter” (214). A little later, “they flushed yet more…more goldenly (214), and, somewhat later, the gold Miss Kennedy is described as “[f]lushed less, still less, goldenly paled” (214).
Although there is no indication that they carry on with their customers outside the barroom, these young women do enjoy the opportunity to flirt with them while at work. It is the men who patronize the barroom are associated with music. Whether they are singing a solo or together as a chorus, their selections range from operatic arias to Irish ballads to folk songs. These selections offer ironic commentary on the sexual encounter between Molly and Boylan that is about to take place. As Green explains:

The central passages of...[the] episodes point[s] to two operatic arias: "Tutto e sciolto" from Bellini's La Sonnambula ("The Sleepwalker") and "M'appari" from von Flotow's opera "Martha"...Joyce alludes to them at a critical moment in the Ormond Bar scene after Blazes Boylan has departed for his secret liaison with Molly. Basically, the events in the Ormond and what is sung there represent for Bloom what is happening simultaneously at home between Molly and Boylan, thus offering another musical dimension to the narrative, namely the counterpointing of one narrative level (the music performed in the Ormond Bar) against another (Boylan's affair with Molly). (492)

Although Joyce does not employ musical notation, his use of musical form is generally more controlled and sophisticated than Hurst's. He concludes the chapter with the word "Done" (239), a final chord that reflects the climax of Boylan and Molly's sexual liaison as well as the resolution of the chapter's other sub-themes. Hurst might have used the same word at the conclusion of the scene in which she describes the concert at Carnegie Hall, after which the she is indeed "done" with the aesthetic theme of her novel and her attention returns to the sub-plot about the aging Bertha's difficulties in finding work.
The Joy of Living

Hurst abandoned modernism after *Lummox* and returned to writing in her standard realistic style. Although she remained extremely popular among her audience of middlebrow readers, she was not a critical darling; as Carla Kaplan writes in *Miss Anne in Harlem*, she was often considered a model of “how not to write” (267). In his 1920 novel *This Side of Paradise*, F. Scott Fitzgerald lumps “Fanny (sic) Hurst” together with Edna Ferber, Gouverneur Morris, [and] Mary Roberts Rinehart as authors of his generation who had not produced “among 'em one story or novel that will last ten years.” Some of this critical hostility can be attributed to Hurst’s tendency toward awkward stylistic flourishes. On the other hand, *Lummox* does contain examples of accurate and pointed satire, such as Helga’s description of a certain kind of upper-middle-class philanthropist as “a woman could subscribe to a charity ball with one hand and pinch an orphan with another” (183). Hurst also mocks the intellectual pretentiousness of some of her peers, as seen in the scene in which Ermangarde Ossetrich and her mother argue about the literary merits of “The Cathedral under the Sea,” unaware that Bertha, who is working silently in the same room, inspired Rollo Farley’s great poem. Mrs. Oessetrich rejects modernist poetry as “[f]ree verse. Free-and-easy-verse. I hate faddism. The forms that were good enough for Goethe and Wordsworth and——” (232). Her daughter interrupts:

“‘The Cathedral under the Sea’ is a great impressionistic poem, not the mere dithyrambic prose that the free verse writers are dabbling in…He [Farley] does what he pleases with his rhyme scheme between his first and his sixth or seventh
lines but those lines hold the internal ones firmly together. Farley is not an
anarchist. He’s merely a Progressive. He dares to liberate form and language.”

(233)

Although it is not clear that Ermangarde actually understands what she is saying,
Hurst’s sly satire would not have been lost on many of her detractors. Some of the
critical hostility toward her work can also be attributed to professional jealousy,
because, whatever the experts said, the public continued to adore her. Her novels were
inevitably best sellers and her name on a short story was a guarantee that an issue of a
popular magazine would sell out immediately.

The profound vulnerability of many of Hurst’s characters may also have made
some critics uncomfortable. Other authors also write about poor, lonely, needy women
who long for beauty in their lives, but Hurst’s women seem emotionally injured in a
deeper way and unable to fight back against the system that exploits them. For
example, although Anzia Yezierska is another author who writes about impoverished
heroines, her women are strong enough to cry out:

I am a Russian Jewess, a flame—a longing. A soul consumed with hunger for
heights beyond reach. I am the ache of unvoiced dreams, the clamor of
suppressed desires. I am the unloved lives of generations stifled in Siberian
prisons. I am the urge of ages for the free, the beautiful that never yet was on
land or sea. (Salome 37)

Selina Peake, the protagonist of Edna Ferber’s So Big (1924), is another woman
forced to make her way in life alone. Orphaned and impoverished, Selina is
nevertheless still able to respond to her reduced circumstances in “a singularly clear-
headed fashion, considering her youth and inexperience.” The epitome of practicality, she deposits her small inheritance in the bank, purchases a pair of “stout sensible boots” and “eagerly learned what she could” about the small farming community to which she moves as a schoolteacher (24). Unlike Yezierska’s passionate heroines and Ferber’s aggressive, determined women, however, Bertha neither understands nor resists her situation. She does not even try to defend herself when an employer accuses her of a theft actually performed by Helga. Indeed, she can barely speak, her “lips…so heavy they would not lift” (283).

Some recent critics have suggested that Hurst is not only insensitive to Bertha's situation but is actually mocking her. Laura Hapke argues that the author “makes her [Bertha]…a collaborator in her [own] exploitation…She [Hurst] is angry at Bertha for accepting subordination as her lot” (124). We must recognize, however, Bertha’s acceptance of life as it is is an effective strategy for a woman who has neither the means nor the power to change her circumstances. She is motivated by her desire for an internal fulfillment expressed through music. Hurst may have created a deus ex machina ending for her protagonist, but the reader rejoices for her while acknowledging that things might have been otherwise. Most important, the poverty of Bertha’s life has not destroyed her ability to love. Among the Meyerbogen family, she feels a particular connection with the youngest, little Jimmie, or “Chimmie” as his family calls him, who wears a brace that, in the same way as her own ponderous body, “made him twice too heavy” (324). And, even though music does not play an important part of the Meyerbogens’ lives, Bertha will still possess “[t]he knowledges that came to her in
chimes from the dark forests within her…” (2) in the person of little Chimmie, in whose very name the chimes of love continue to shine, goldily.

It is interesting to speculate about what might have happened to Hurst’s reputation if she had continued to write in a modernist mode. Would her large, enthusiastic audience have continued to enjoy novels and short stories that not only considered serious social issues, but were difficult to read and understand? Would present-day critics be more generous to her and include her among women writers, both realist and modernist, who have been restored to the literary canon, such as Yezierska, Davis, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Susan Glaspell, and Zora Neale Hurston? We will never be able to truly answer that question and perhaps the more important question is why the issues of social justice that Hurst considers in *Lummox* still exist in our own time.
CHAPTER 7

A PICTURE HELD US CAPTIVE:
THE AMERICAN REGIONALIST MOVEMENT
AND EDNA FERBER’S EARLY NOVELS

The post-Civil War decade of the 1870s, the post-World War I decade of the 1920s, and the Depression years of the 1930s are generally considered the most important eras of American regional literature. Not coincidentally, these decades were also times of intense national self-examination that followed periods of major social and economic upheaval. Some regional authors sought to recreate an Eden-like America that Tom Lutz describes as “a fantasy national past” (26), but others focused on the dangers they perceived in the nation’s tendency toward uncontrolled capitalism and unrestrained materialism. In addition, they decried the loss of regional cultural variety resulting from increasing industrial standardization. These regional authors focused on revising the accepted narrative of American history and creating a stronger, more egalitarian, and less commercial society. In doing so, they drew on what Van Wyck Brooks describes as America’s “inexhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals” to create a “usable past” out of which they could help create a different kind of future (Usable Past 399).

In this act of deconstructing and reconstituting the American experience, the region often serves as a site of resistance to what Robert L. Dorman calls “the congested, proletarianized, centralized, and standardized future toward which the country seemed irreversibly to be declining” (xii). The region thus provides a counterbalance to “all of these modern tendencies as the means toward a richer, freer,
and more humane way of life” (xii). In this way, the region serves as a metonym for the national; in John Dewey’s telling phrase, “[t]he locality is the only universal” (687).

Regional literature fell out of popularity during the late twentieth century in favor of more cosmopolitan and experimental styles. It has gained renewed respect in the current era as the tension between the region and the urban center takes on greater relevance. Building on my earlier analyses of the ways Edna Ferber uses her novels to present contemporary attitudes toward immigration, assimilation, racism, women’s place in society, and other critical social issues, I consider her application of the genre of regionalism to a discussion of America’s “usable past” and how it can be used to create a vision for the nation’s future. Although my emphasis in this chapter is on Ferber’s intensely visual literary style, it is critical to keep in mind that she is writing to support her social-justice themes, not to experiment with literary techniques. By associating the visual elements found in several of Ferber’s early novels with the realistic regional paintings of Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975), a connection I believe has not been previously observed, I demonstrate how both author and artist reflected the opinion popular during the early decades of the twentieth-century that the greatness of the United States is situated in its regions, not its cosmopolitan urban areas.

Today, Ferber’s contributions to the regionalist genre are mentioned only in passing, if at all. In his study of the relationship between regionalism and cosmopolitanism, for example, Lutz mentions Ferber only twice and then casually, including her name on lists of authors whose work he acknowledges, but does not consider significant enough to study closely. Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse do not
mention Ferber at all in their study of American regionalism Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture. Appreciating the literary qualities in her work, particularly her adaptation of techniques of muralist paintings popular in her era, requires recontextualizing her fiction within the moment in which she wrote.

At first glance, Ferber is an unlikely candidate to achieve fame as a regional novelist. Well known for her sophisticated Manhattan lifestyle, she was an insider in New York’s literary and theatrical communities and, _inter alia_, a member of the famed Algonquin Round Table, a best-selling author, and a popular playwright. Her roots, however, were closer to Manhattan, Kansas, than Manhattan island. Born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, she lived in Illinois and Iowa until her family settled in Appleton, Wisconsin when she was twelve years old. Although many urban “sophisticates” would downplay such a background, Ferber never mocked her midwestern upbringing. Indeed, in her 1938 autobiography _A Peculiar Treasure_, she writes that the midwest and far west “stimulates and excites me more than any other section of America. There is about it a naive and unfinished quality that appeals to the imagination…It seems to me to be fresher, more vital, an integral part of the American way of life…you find little of the cosmopolitan European influence, of the aping of foreign manners and ways” (_Treasure_ 255-256). This love of regional America is reflected in her texts, which are variously set in rural Illinois (So Big 1924), along the banks of the Mississippi River (Show Boat 1926), the Oklahoma frontier (Cimarron 1929), the Housatonic River region of western Connecticut (American Beauty 1931), northern Wisconsin (Come and Get It 1935), New Orleans (Saratoga Trunk 1941),
Texas (*Giant* 1952), and Alaska (*Ice Palace* 1958). For all her east-coast sophistication and style, Ferber was undeniably a midwestern girl at heart.

“Let’s Make America Great Again”

Writing in 1918, Brooks suggests that the United States would not be able to develop or sustain a unified culture because it could not reconcile the theoretical and practical sides of its national character. In particular, he argues, America’s “world of poetry” was “hidden away, too inaccessible, too intangible, too unreal” to ever “be brought into the open, or...serve, as the poetry of life rightly should serve, in harnessing thought and action together, turning life into a disinterested adventure” (*America’s Coming of Age* 27). Elsewhere, he argues that “[t]he present is a void” and that “the American writer floats in that void because the past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value.” Then he raises his great challenge to American intellectuals: “But is this the only possible past? If we need another past so badly, is it inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one?” (“Usable Past” 339).

Literary regionalism is an attempt to recover this “usable past.” Its roots date to the years immediately following the Civil War, when, as Doran suggests, it became an important genre because it served both as an act of resistance and an “act of recovery” (11) favored by writers because it was “concretely, indeed, programmatically envisioned to be the utopian means of reconstructing the nationalizing, homogenizing urban industrial complex, redirecting it toward an accommodation with local folkways and local environments” (xii). Donna Campbell situates mid-nineteenth century regional narratives
within the tradition of popular realistic fiction and its sub-genre of local-color writing, both of which focus on the “lives of humble, ordinary people in an environment threatened by time, change, and external disruption” (*Resisting Regionalism* 7). She considers these genres less concerned with major disruptive events such as the Civil War than with the “enduring world that exists both prior to and as a consequence of war’s disruption” (8).

Both men and women wrote local-color narratives, but because they operated “within [the] enforced limitations that in large measure define women’s…fiction,” they came to be dismissed as a woman’s genre (23). In addition, Campbell writes:

…local color offered a degree of moral definition and certainty, a sense of individual control to counteract the helplessness and incipient *anomie* of postbellum urban life. As increasing urbanization, industrial and technological growth, and rapid advances in transportation created a sense of uncontrolled and uncontrollable growth, readers welcomed a literature that defined specific parameters and identifiable codes of conduct…The local colorists offered an appearance of order, closure, and humanity in a world that increasingly failed to provide them. (23)

Today, many scholars have a more nuanced attitude toward local-color literature, with critics such as Campbell, Fetterley, Pryse, Josephine Donovan, Kate McCullough, and Barbara Solomon supportive of the genre and including nineteenth-century women who wrote local-color fiction among the early feminists.

Lutz, on the other hand, takes a cosmopolitan perspective, asserting that “[t]he region in literary regionalism is at most of secondary importance” (27). Instead, he situates all regional texts published during the second half of the nineteenth century “at
the center of debates about the meaning, value, and purpose of literary art” (14). Specifically, he argues that they are designed to construct a “fantasy national past, an image of ‘an earlier generative community' against the backdrop of increased immigration and great anxiety about the strangers in our urban midst” (26). He positions the genre within the school of cosmopolitan literature, writing that the “literary culture to which literary regionalists subscribed and which they helped create was based on cosmopolitan ideals of cultural inclusiveness, ideals embedded in regionalism’s narrative conventions” (27). He also acknowledges the claim of critics such as Richard Brodhead and Amy Kaplan that “regionalist literature in America has always been an urban elite consumable” rather than a grass-roots genre (26).

The influence of regionalist writing began to decline with the emergence of the intensely masculine school of naturalism. If local-color regionalism was thought of as “feminine,” naturalism was a genre for a man’s man. As Frank Norris famously remarked, naturalist writers were not interested in “the drama of the broken teacup.” Instead, authors such as Norris, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and Jack London articulated a world view that was realistic and sometimes sordid, replacing “the feminine virtues with new ones: Virility, Strength, Massiveness, Largeness, Obviousness, and Primary or Instinctive Action” (Campbell, Resisting Regionalism 60). Regionalism’s resurgence of popularity during the 1920s and early 1930s took place during a time that Dorman describes as characterized by “a growing sense of cultural disintegration” (60) as the close-knit communities of small-town America became increasingly marginalized and the country turned toward urbanization, mechanization, and industrialization.

According to Justin Wolff, the regionalists' resistance to these trends was an attempt to
“stem the nation’s decay and the course of empire away from material and intellectual excess—away from cosmopolitan consumption and back toward a hearty folk ethos” (252). The literary regionalists, together with the modernists, “the makers of the Harlem Renaissance, the *Partisan Review* cosmopolitans, [and] the New Masses communists,” shared “a common faith in cultural radicalism” that reflects “the belief that artistic and intellectual production (especially social art) can in itself help to bring about dramatic social change. Repeatedly, they would with these others be disdainful of mass culture and devoted to artistic innovation and experimentation, to ungenteel subject matter and alternative forms of expression” (Dorman 22).

At the same time, attitudes were changing within the American art world. The growing tension between literary realists and modernists took place in representational art circles as well, as critical favor began to shift from the realistic painters to the abstract modernists. Nevertheless, regional narrative—both in literature and representational art—remained a popular way to employ the “usable past” to comment on contemporary social issues. The popularity of regional fiction was paralleled by that of the historical mural cycles. These visual narratives were sometimes funded by private patrons, but most often commissioned by public authorities for display in civic buildings and other public areas. Both regional fiction and historical murals were designed to be entertaining and aesthetically pleasing, but also served to educate an increasingly diverse American public and thus reinforce shared social norms and values.

A mural is a work of art painted directly on or otherwise attached to a large surface, such as the wall of a cave or the walls or ceilings of buildings. The earliest known murals are found in French caves dating from the Paleolithic era (c. 30,000
They are also found in ancient Egyptian tombs (c. 3150 BCE), as well as in churches and homes of medieval and Renaissance Europe. Like printed text, but unlike film (at least until modern technology made it possible for a viewer to study individual frames), murals are a static form of art. Unchanging and accessible, they are a type of “slow art” that communicates its meaning over time to observers who have the opportunity to view them at close range and on multiple occasions. As the art historian Leonard Folgarait writes, murals “describe, construct, and somewhat control the human viewing subject. Upon crossing into a mural’s field of engagement, the status of the viewer changes from spectator to participant and her or his action within this spatial envelope is then seen in terms of that state of envelopment” (28).

Thomas Hart Benton ranks among the most important American muralists. Born into a prominent Missouri political family (his father was a four-time U.S. Congressman and a great-uncle was one of Missouri’s first U.S. senators), he rejected a career in politics in favor of art. Wolff, his biographer, writes that after studying in Chicago and Paris, Benton “declared himself an ‘enemy of modernism,’ which he considered ‘hopelessly inattentive to sociocultural realities and common experience’” (115). He turned instead to the emerging genre of naturalistic regional art. At the same time, he “began to formulate what would become his chief artistic philosophy: art is obliged to engage or enact common experience” (144). The New York Times art critic Holland Carter writes that Benton applied his “distinctive brand of stylized realism” to “the vision of a populist, working-class America remembered from his childhood” (NYT June 29, 2012). Although Benton’s increasingly conservative politics and values eventually distanced him from the art world’s inner circle, Wolff emphasizes that from 1910
through the mid-1920s, Benton’s “politics were grounded in the liberal traditions of Midwestern populism and mainstream socialism” (115).

“Locality Exists in Three Dimensions”

Greil Marcus’s comment that for Benton, “every American place was a real place” can be extended to Ferber as well, as well as his comment that:

> [t]he idea—the faith—was that America was a ruling notion, an expanding experiment, geographically but also politically, that imprinted itself as an idea on every town, city, farm, forest, swamp, or hamlet under the sway of the country’s history, so that, if you knew how to look, you could see that any place could at once enact and speak for the country itself. (182)

Benton did not begin his career as a muralist, but his interest in regional scenes is evident even in his earliest paintings. His interest in regionalism was also sparked by the work of the philosophers and social scientists John Dewey and Lewis Mumford. He was particularly influenced by Dewey’s 1920 essay “Americanism and Localism,” in which Dewey “demands a literature that portrays how ‘a locality exists in three dimensions,’ states that ‘the locality is the only universal,’ and maintains that when we explore our immediate domain, ‘its forces and not just its characters and colors, we shall find what we sought.’” (qtd. Wolff 171). Benton also incorporated into his work Mumford’s view that “local customs and common experiences trump political or ideological categories” (qtd. Wolff 190).

Although Ferber’s writing reflects similar attitudes toward the region and the locality, she does not acknowledge any influence of philosophers or social scientists in
her autobiographies. She does mention some early literary influences, in particular emphasizing the work of Charles Dickens, whose own texts communicate strong held opinions about social issues. And she certainly applies Dewey’s dictum that “the locality is the only universal” to her own writing. In her 1963 autobiography *A Kind of Magic*, she writes that “[t]here was nothing deliberate or sentimental in my having chosen to write novel after novel whose background was a distinct region of the United States,” adding:

I have never ceased to marvel that a nation made up of such dissimilar stuff—human stuff and geographical and climatic as, say, California and Vermont; or Mississippi and Minnesota; or Iowa and Louisiana, could stick together for almost two hundred years. These states might be, in point of difference, separate countries. Here they are, welded with the metal of unity which now and then shows rust and wear and at times appears to be held together only with strips of adhesive tape…So the regional novels simply happened, with no over-all plan in mind. (279)

Benton and Ferber both regarded the region as the source of authentic American culture and values and respected the hard-working men and women who lived there. Nevertheless, their work is not simply boosterism and they were not afraid to deal with a darker side of the American experience. In his 1936 mural *A Social History of the State of Missouri*, for example, Benton ignored requests from the commissioning authorities to present a whitewashed local history. Instead, he demonstrates that the state’s history “was characterized by aggression, revenge, and blood” (Wolff 257). This mural cycle includes scenes depicting the lynching of African Americans and the shooting of innocent bystanders during robberies by outlaw bands. In one panel (Plate 1), Benton
foregrounds a well-dressed white man offering a drink of liquor to a vulnerable Native American. In the background, settlers unpack their household goods from the covered wagon in which they have travelled west; others assert that the white man has taken control of native territory by plowing the fields and shooting local animals. Similarly, in his *American Historical Epic* cycle (1919-1928), Benton includes the “horrific attacks and counterattacks waged by settlers and Native Americans in their territorial wars...[t]he history Benton tells here is inexorable and totally determined by a struggle for resources—and the power and hate that this struggle engenders” (Wolff 181).

Nor does Ferber whitewash her stories. Characters in her early novels include prostitutes such as Dixie Lee, the brothel owner in *Cimarron*, and Lotta, a prostitute who escapes from a brothel in *Come and Get It*. She also writes about outlaws (The Kid in *Cimarron*), gamblers (Gaylord Ravenal in *Show Boat*), and ruthless businessmen (Barney Glasgow in *Come and Get It*). Her plots include scenes of racist and anti-Semitic violence as well as descriptions of the ways in which the federal government exploits Native Americans, environmental degradation, and the violence of nature—not to mention incidents involving marital infidelity and spousal abandonment.

Such strong expressions of America’s moral ambiguity led to predictable outrage. The modernist abstract painter Stuart Davis, for example, dismissed Benton’s work as “dime-novel history” (qtd. Wolff 186) and a writer for the *Tulsa Tribune* who objected to the artist’s decision to include a portrait of the corrupt Kansas City politician “Boss” Tom Pendergast in *A Social History of the State of Missouri* inveighed in a January 1937 editorial: “Shame on you, Thomas Hart Benton, shame on you!” (qtd. Wolff 259).

Similarly, Ferber writes that after the publication of *Cimarron*, “[s]carcely a town in that
incredible commonwealth [Oklahoma] failed to send me a message of burning contempt, claiming itself defamed” (*Magic* 263). This was just a warm-up for the anger that accompanied her 1952 novel *Giant*, which takes place in Texas, “that virile and dramatic commonwealth.” Although readers elsewhere enjoyed the novel, the Texans’ response was negative in the extreme: Headlines in black letters two inches high streamed across the pages of Texas newspapers. This Ferber is a liar and a criminal. We think she ought to be caught and hanged here in Texas…She’s an idiot. She doesn’t know Texas. She’ll be shot if she ever dares to show her face again in Texas. Letters. Telephone calls. Animal rage. (*Magic* 173)

Nevertheless, in their realistic, pragmatic, yet hopeful, attitudes toward the United States, Benton and Ferber reflect what the philosopher Sidney Hook once said of John Dewey and speak for “those who repine not over what America was or might have been but who still have hope for what America may yet be” (Hook 239). The popularity and outrage that accompanied their work reflects intensity of the debate over not only “what America may yet be,” but the nature of the usable past that will help determine how we will get there.

“The Most Complicated Form of Painting in the Whole Range of Art”

Benton and Ferber used their canvases and texts to present literal and metaphorical historical mural cycles of the American experience. Although one was a painter and one a writer, there is a common approach to the way they execute their narratives. Both use similar techniques that might be described as artistic and literary
brush strokes. The art critic and muralist Edward Blashfield describes muralism as "the most complicated form of painting in the whole range of art" (v) because it incorporates the genres of portrait, landscape, and figure into a single visual whole. Close reading of Ferber’s work reveals a unified aesthetic entity created through a similar series of word-paintings. This includes vivid portraits of her leading characters and detailed descriptions of the landscapes within which she situates them, as well as the presence of often-memorable secondary characters who are similar to the figure drawings that appear throughout Benton’s murals.

Benton also combined landscape, portrait, and figure within his regional paintings and murals. In 1939, for example, he produced a series of lithographs for use in advertising the film adaptation of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. Five of the illustrations are portraits of the main characters; the sixth “Departure of the Joads,” depicts the scene in which the desperate family leaves their home in the Oklahoma dustbowl for an uncertain future in California (Plate 2). The Joads stand in front of their abandoned home, which now seems nothing more than an empty shack set in a parched, barren landscape. The men load bundles filled with the family’s possessions into the automobile they will drive to California. The children stand mutely in front of the car. One touch of elegance—a lamp on a small table—remains unpacked. Ma Joad is encouraging the terrified grandmother to leave her home and the old, bent grandfather sits, defeated, in front of the shack.

The Joads, however, are not what the viewer first notices about the painting. As Margaret C. Conrads observes, the bleak landscape is “the ever-present, silent main
character.” It “fills the sheet, and the narrative is embedded within it, reinforcing the role of the land as the primary shaper of the Joads’ experience” (69). The vast sky and bleak terrain, not the family, is the controlling image. A single tree that stands next to one of the shacks and the trunks of fallen trees in the foreground underscore the ruin of both the landscape and the Joads’ lives. As Conrads observes, Benton enhances the anxiety of the scene with the use of “[d]ramatic, jagged white clouds [that] pierce the black pre-dawn sky” and are relieved only by the “sliver of moon…and the upright figure of a little girl…[that] help ground Benton’s composition and provide the only promise of hope…” (69). Even if the observer knew nothing about Steinbeck’s novel or the Oklahoma dustbowl, he would nevertheless immediately understand that the Joads are in desperate circumstances and being forced to leave their home against their will.

There are human beings and horses in Benton’s Trail Riders (1964-65) (Plate 3) as well, but they are so dwarfed by the majesty of the landscape against which they are placed as to be almost irrelevant to the scene. The equal balance to the vertical and horizontal in this painting is characteristic of the way Benton structures many of his landscapes. The viewer’s eye is drawn from the glacial lake in the foreground and the mountains in the background to the controlling image of Mount Assiniboine, which is placed in the center “like a priest with his arms extended or like a reclining woman’s body” (Brenson, New York Times 17 Nov. 1989).

Benton also painted a number of industrial and agricultural landscapes. While his portraits and figure drawings play a more prominent role in these works, the landscape remains of considerable importance and serves to situate his people within their milieu. For example, in Weighing Cotton (1939) (Plate 4), the white, unbleached clothing of the
black field hands helps to blend them into the landscape, directly associating them with the cotton they are harvesting and establishing them as one with their environment.

Ferber also took inspiration from the regional landscape. For example, in the Pulitzer Prize-winning *So Big* (1924), she contrasts the superficiality of urban life in Chicago with the natural beauty of the Illinois farmland and the creativity she believes grows organically out of its soil. Similar to other Ferber heroines, Selina Peake DeJong is a woman forced to make her way through life alone. Left indigent when her gambler-father is murdered, she finds work as a schoolteacher in a rural farming community, marries a local farmer, gives birth to a son, and is again left penniless when her young husband dies unexpectedly.

The “incredibly Dutch district” southwest of Chicago to which Selina relocates is “known first as New Holland and later as High Prairie” (9). Like the European country from which its residents are descended, New Holland is flat, tidy, and well-cultivated. Describing the DeJong’s small truck farm, Ferber writes:

> About this little twenty-five-acre garden patch there was nothing of the majesty of the Iowa, Illinois, and Kansas grain farms, with their endless billows of wheat and corn, rye, alfalfa, and barley rolling away on the horizon. Everything was done in diminutive here. An acre of this. Two acres of that. A score of chickens. One cow. One horse. Two pigs. Here was all the drudgery of farm life with none of its bounteousness, fine sweep, or splendor. (107)

This scene provides a good example of Ferber’s intensely visual style as well as her use of unpretentious, everyday language to paint her verbal landscapes. High Prairie may be rural and newly settled, but the stolid Dutch settlers have already tamed
it. It is clearly different from the wild Oklahoma frontier she describes in *Cimarron* and the dense Wisconsin forests of *Come and Get It*. Here, Ferber uses short sentences and words of one of two syllables to reinforce the image of the “diminutive” truck farm. In addition, in the same way as Benton’s cotton pickers are represented as one with the natural scene into which they are placed, Selina is depicted as an integral part of the landscape within which she works, at one with nature, not alien to it. In one scene, for example, visitors to the farm watch her as she comes in from the fields:

> Then they saw her coming, a small dark figure against the background of sun and sky and fields. She came swiftly yet ploddingly, for the ground was heavy…As she came nearer they saw that she was wearing a dark skirt pinned up about her ankles to protect it from the wet spring earth and yet it was spattered with a border of mud spots…Her hair blew a little in the gentle spring breeze. Her checks were faintly pink…She saw Dirk [her son]; smiled, waved. (276-277)

Ferber’s description of the union of her heroine and her environment demonstrates a strong reciprocal relationship between human beings and nature and underscores Selina’s acceptance of situation and fate. No matter how difficult her life becomes, Selina remains sensitive to the beauty and enchantment of the natural world around her. This gives her a unique strength, because “always, to her, red and green cabbages were to be jade and Burgundy, chrysoprase and porphyry. Life has no weapons against a woman like that” (28).

Her son Dirk, on the other hand, is softer and more materialistic and consequently, in Ferber’s view, less resilient than his mother. Dirk abandons his original
ambition to become an architect and moves to Chicago to work as a bond trader. Caught in that sensual music, he neglects his creative soul. Selina warns him of the danger he faces: “Beauty! Self-expression. Whatever you want to call it. You wait! She’ll turn on you some day. Some day you’ll want her, and she won’t be there” (232). His mother’s prophecy is realized at the novel’s end when the young woman Dirk loves rejects him because of his materialism. Left alone to confront the emptiness of the path he has chosen, Dirk’s isolation and feeling of inner emptiness reflect Ferber’s view that America’s love affair with unbridled capitalism has placed the country on a dangerous path.

Ferber’s description of the DeJongs’ tidy Illinois farm stands in stark contrast to the frontier landscape she presents in *Cimarron*. In an early scene in the 1929 novel, for example, Sabra and Yancey Cravat leave her family’s elegant Wichita home to begin their journey to the new Oklahoma territory:

Suddenly the land…had become red: red clay as far as the eye could see. The rivers and little creeks were sanguine with it, and at sunset the sky seemed to reflect it, so that sometimes Sabra’s eyes burned with all this scarlet. When the trail led through a cleft in a hill the blood red of the clay on either side was like a gaping wound…The Oklahoma sky was not blue but steel color, and all through the day it was a brazen sheet of glittering tin over their heads. Its glare seared the eyeballs. (49)

Ferber depicts the Oklahoma landscape her characteristically straightforward and direct style, bringing the vastness and harshness of the territory to life through both the sounds of the words she uses and the imagery she creates from them. Instead of the
short sentences she uses to illustrate the compact tidiness of the DeJong farm—“An acre of this. Two acres of that.”—she describes the Oklahoma frontier through repeated use of words beginning with the letter “S”—“suddenly,” “see,” “sanguine with it,” “at sunset the sky.” The elongated, sensuous sound of the letter “S” suggests a region with more space than the abrupt descriptions of the tidy Illinois farmland in So Big and the sinuous shape of the letter can also be compared to the bodies of Benton’s elongated and sensuous laborers. Ferber reinforces the harshness of the environment through her use of words beginning with the rough, abrupt letters “R” and “G”: “red clay as far as the eye could see,” “the blood red of the clay,” and “like a gaping wound.” Thus, when she writes that “[t]he Oklahoma sky was not blue but steel color, and all through the day it was a brazen sheet of glittering tin over their heads,” both the harsh sound of her words and the images of the desolate landscape she creates through them reinforces the barrenness of the new territory and anticipates some of the difficulties the Cravats will face there.

Ferber subordinates the settlers to a powerful natural world that is indifferent to human ambition and much of the plot deals with their efforts to take physical, moral, and social control of the new territory. The conventional narrative about the history of America’s western expansion has long ignored the ways in which both the federal government and the settlers marginalized the existing native cultures and superimposed their own values onto their new communities. In Cimarron, Ferber challenges the standard attitude that the land was the white man’s for the taking and questions whether the United States has paid too high a price for bringing its idea of “civilization” to new territories.
To more fully appreciate the difference between Ferber’s view and the conventional narrative of western expansion, it is useful to contrast her text with the popular 1931 film adaptation of her novel. The film opens with scenes of the 1889 Oklahoma land rush in which the harsh landscape serves only as background. Throughout the film, the landscape is subordinated to action, plot and character. In contrast, the novel begins with a scene set inside the dining room in Sabra’s family’s elegant Wichita home. The reader is imaginatively seated at the table with the other dinner guests, joining them in listening to the story of the land rush as seen through the eyes of the “bizarre, glamorous, and slightly mythical” Yancey Cravat (9). Through his formidable descriptive powers, Yancey both creates and controls the verbal landscape he is creating:

They came like a procession—a crazy procession—all the way to the Border, covering the ground as fast as they could, by any means at hand, pushing and shoving each other into the ditches to get there first…Over the little hills they came, and out of the scrub-oak woods and across the prairie…They came on foot, by God…They came in buggies and wagons and on horseback and muleback. In prairie schooners and ox carts and carriages. I saw a surrey, honey colored, with a fringe around the top… (14)

This scene—down to the surrey with the fringe on top—does appear in the film adaptation, but the movie audience has only a few minutes to absorb it. Although it communicates the general impression Ferber is trying to create, the detail is lost. In the novel, however, the eyes of both reader and dinner guests become like “those of men who follow a game in which they would fain take part” (7). In the same way as a person
observing a mural, the reader has time to pause in front of the scene, observing small
details that might otherwise be overlooked.

In Show Boat, Ferber’s focus is on the American South. The frontier here is not a
geographical place, as in So Big and Cimarron, but the liminal space between the
enchanted world of the Mississippi River and the demonic commercial worlds of
Chicago and Manhattan. While Ferber does not dismiss the consequences of the
South’s legacy of slavery and its enduring racial prejudice, it is clear she considers the
its natural beauty a source of its unique cultural creativity. Just as she balances the
natural beauty of the region with the ugliness of its racism, she balances the enchanted
world of the Mississippi with the violence natural forces inflict upon it. The death by
drowning of Captain Andy Hawks, the affable owner of the show boat, is presented in a
horrifying word-picture. Captain Andy is swept overboard during a storm and drowns,
“unseen in the dimness, in the fog, in the savage swift current of the Mississippi,
wrapped in the coils of the old yellow serpent, tighter, tighter, deeper, deeper, until his
struggles ceased” (190).

In other scenes, however, Ferber paints verbal landscapes of the Mississippi as
a world of harmony and abundance. In one scene, for example, she describes the long,
languid afternoons young Magnolia Hawks spends walking along the river’s Eden-like
banks with Julie, the showboat’s leading actress:

They would wander inland until they found trees other than the willows, the live
oaks, and the elms that lined the river banks. They would come upon wild
honeysuckle, opalescent pink. In the autumn they went nutting, returning with
sackfuls of hickory and hazel nuts…Sometimes they experienced the shock of
gay surprise that follows the sudden sight of gentian, a flash of that rarest flower colors, blue. (87-88)

Ferber uses color imagery in both scenes to reinforce the emotions she is seeking to generate. The horror of Andy’s drowning is intensified by the vivid image of the Mississippi as an “old yellow serpent,” while the descriptions of “opalescent pink” and “that rarest of flower colors, blue” adds to the feeling of harmony that exists between the friends and between the two women and the natural world. In addition to her use of color imagery, Ferber reinforces her world of wonder through the use of words beginning with the sensuous letter “w”: wander, willows, and wild.

Ferber returns to the literal frontier in her 1935 novel *Come and Get It*, the rags-to-riches story of Barney “Gusto” Glasgow, a self-made man who works his way up from lumber-camp chore boy and “cookee” to become the wealthy owner of a successful paper-mill empire. *Come and Get It* does not rank among Ferber’s best work; both her plot and her writing style are overlong and overcomplicated. Even worse, Ferber kills off the character she herself describes as “the most vital and engaging person in the story” (qtd. Smyth 157) midway through the text, and the novel sinks into mediocrity. Nevertheless, it does provide another interesting example of the author’s ability to use words to create a kind of literary mural.

As in *Cimarron*, Ferber opens her narrative with a detailed scene set inside an elegant home in a small Midwestern city—here, the town of Butte des Morts in east-central Wisconsin. Similar to the opening of *Cimarron*, she establishes the scene and situation slowly, using a full four chapters to meticulously describe the interior of the Glasgow home. The reader can easily picture herself inside the house in which Barney,
the poor boy made good, takes great pride. There is “thick pile of the stairway carpet” (1) and “good tapestry, true in weave and dye” (2) that “all but covered the landing wall”—such fine work that the Gobelin Brothers themselves “need not have blushed for it” (3). Ferber must have derived sly pleasure from sending up her Eastern friends by contrasting the elegance of Barney’s home with the surprise reflected in the faces of the “Massachusetts or Pennsylvania paper-mill men visiting for the first time” (3). They are startled by the sophistication of Barney’s lifestyle, because “[e]ven now, in the year 1907…if [they] gave Wisconsin a thought at all, [they] pictured it as little more than a snowy waste sprinkled with pines, Indian tepees, small inland lakes and Milwaukee German breweries, all lying somewhere in that wilderness north of Chicago” (3).

Although he is house-proud, Barney frequently rebels against the constraints of family life and local society and escapes to the northern Wisconsin frontier for a brief respite from civilization. There he recalls his youth as a camp cook who slept in a haystack and woke up at three a.m. to start making breakfast for the loggers:

The camp buildings were on the main road, halfway between the scene of the cutting and the landing…At three the boy would crawl…into the bitterness of the black winter morning. First, the fires to be started…The fires must leap, must blaze to penetrate the icy northern air… (93)

Barney is promoted to logger while still a young man. Although the camps are harsh and the work rugged, he is depicted as one with the landscape. His son Bernie, on the other hand, is a responsible businessman, but far less vigorous and overly intellectual. Ferber praises both father and son for their unique individual visions and
energies, but also criticizes them for exploiting the land out of which they draw their fortunes and for failing to replant the forests they destroy.

Throughout the novel, Ferber avoids presenting a romanticized or picturesque landscape. Barney is representative of the late-nineteenth century capitalists who freely exploited natural resources. Some characters do show respect for the natural environment, particularly Swen Bostrom, the “giant Swede who was general foreman” of Barney’s lumber camp. Swen, the novel’s moral voice, warns Barney about the environmental devastation his irresponsible logging is causing:

Iss yust about finish—white pine timber around here way up to Peninsula. Pretty soon is all gone. Then what you do for pulp wood, eh, Gusto? If old man Hewitt [the original owner of the logging camps and Barney’s father-in-law] he replanted fifty year ago when timber is so thick up here in Wisconsin and Michigan and if you replanted maybe twenty-five year ago, now would be fine stand of timber up here again. (187)

Neither Barney nor Bernie listens to Swen, and, the author implies, their capitalistic assault will continue until the environment can bear it no more. Swen’s warning is thus similar to that of Selina deJong makes to her son: “She’ll turn on you some day. Some day you’ll want her, and she won’t be there” (232). Both Barney and Dirk ignore his message at their peril.
“The People, Yes”: Portrait and Figure Drawing in Benton and Ferber

Although landscape is central both to Benton’s narrative murals and Ferber’s mural-like narratives, it is not the primary focus of their work. The dynamism of their texts and the messages they are trying to convey about the future of the United States depend on the characters who live and work within these regional landscapes.

Benton portrays his characters in a variety of situations. Whether they are at work in fields or factories or at leisure watching movies or playing poker, they are not superimposed against a background, but fully integrated into their surroundings. Some of his portraits were based on recognizable people living in his era, and some local legislators, newspaper editors, and other civic leaders were enraged by his depictions. Today, however, we are more likely to see Benton’s people as representative types rather than as individuals.

Jake Milgram Wien writes that “Benton’s paramount artistic concern, particularly as a painter of murals, was to conquer what he called ‘deep space,’ comparable to the lifelike quality of cinematic projection,” and that, as a result, he “rendered the figures in the foreground and the background of his paintings with equally sharp clarity” (140). The most important person in the canvas or mural is usually placed in the foreground, where he immediately attracts the viewer’s gaze. For example, in the “Deep South” panel of the 1930-31 America Today cycle (Plate 5), a muscular black man, his legs somewhat disproportionately longer than his sinuous torso, dominates the foreground. The scene is a cotton field within which Benton also includes figure drawings of his minor characters, the laborers. These workers are both black and white and are as important to the landscape—but no more so—as the working animals, the bales of cotton, and the
wagons and rivers on which the cotton is transported. A similar juxtaposition of portrait, landscape, and figure can be found in the “Steel” panel later in the cycle (Plate 6). In this scene, Benton foregrounds a muscular white laborer; in contrast to the earlier portrait of the African American laborer, the white worker’s sinuous, elongated body is disproportionally longer in the torso than the legs. The steelworker leans forward as though he is working on something just outside the range of the picture, drawing the viewer’s eye outside the frame. The other laborers and the intricate machinery of the steel mill are equally balanced in the background and serve to frame the highlighted worker. In both the “Deep South” and the “Steel” panels, the central subjects’ hands are raised above their heads, a possible allusion to the crucifixion of the working man on the altar of capitalism as well as an illustration of the unity between the worker and his environment.

Like Benton, Ferber is concerned with presenting accurate pictures of both her protagonists (her “portraits”) and her minor characters (her “figure drawings”). In her novels, Ferber generally avoids detailed psychological analysis of her characters. Instead, information about their essential identities can be drawn from both from their relationships with other characters and from the physical environments into which they are placed. Although Ferber’s protagonists often fall into specific types, including the plucky, independent heroine, the dashing-but-irresponsible leading man, and the dour, rigid “married spinster,” subtle changes in her portraits between texts keep them from falling into stereotype.

Benton’s women and Ferber’s independent-minded female protagonists also serve to destabilize the trope of the pioneer woman known as the Madonna of the
Prairie, who was praised for devoting herself exclusively to husband and family. The iconic portrait of this self-sacrificing wife and mother was painted by the German-American artist, W.H. D. Koerner (Plate 7) and served as the cover illustration of Emerson Hough’s novel The Covered Wagon (1922). The portrait is of a modestly-dressed woman driving a covered wagon. The folds in the canvas of the wagon form a halo around her head, making clear the association with the Virgin Mary.

Benton, on the other hand, was more likely to depict a woman fleeing her home to escape a flood (Flight of the Thielens, 1938), taking part in a barroom fight (“Frankie and Johnny”/A Social History of the State of Missouri, 1936), or commuting to work during the morning subway rush hour (“City Activities with Subway”/America Today, 1930). Nor is this stereotype of the saintly wife-and-mother the same as the portrait of the frontier wife that Ferber paints in Cimarron. In Ferber’s telling, Sabra leaves her family’s home for the Oklahoma territory not dressed as a modest, self-sacrificing wife, but as a proper Wichita society woman, dressed in “last year’s second best cheviot, lined, boned, basqued, and (though plain for its day) braided all the way down the front with an elaborate pattern of curlicues. Her gray straw bonnet was trimmed only with a puff of velvet and a bird” (45). Within a few days, however, she is wearing a different outfit, “the second-best gray cheviot open at the throat and her hair in a long black braid...She had got out the sunbonnet which one of the less formidable Venables had jokingly given her at parting, and this she wore to shield her eyes from the pitiless glare of sky and plain. The gray straw bonnet, with its puff of velvet and its bird, reposed in its box in the back of the wagon” (52). Sabra’s change of hat reflects her pragmatism and
the rest of the narrative deals with how she matures from dependent young wife into an independent woman who is the source of strength for her family and her community.

Although Ferber destabilizes the common trope that values woman exclusively in the role of wife-and-mother, she is also aware that there is a downside to her heroines’ independence. Ferber’s women are stronger than their unreliable, albeit sexually attractive, husbands. Nevertheless, the author makes it clear that her heroines need the balance provided by the men they love to help them overcome a certain rigidity in their own personalities. In Cimarron, Yancey leaves home for years at a time to pursue a series of adventures, which enables Sabra to emerge as an independent community leader. She “ran the paper alone, as she wished it run...She very nearly ran the town of Osage. She was a power in the Territory” (242). But she also is “a woman who had forgotten the pleasant ways of dalliance. Those ...years had served to accentuate her spinsterish qualities; had made her more and more powerful; less human, had slowed the machinery of her emotional equipment” (205). Yancey brings out a vitality in Sabra that disappears from her personality during his absences.

In So Big, on the other hand, Ferber combines the trope of the self-sacrificing mother/Madonna with that of the independent woman in her description of Selina’s devotion to her own son and to young Roelf Poole, the farm boy and surrogate son whose artistic talents she encourages. These qualities are first illustrated in Ferber’s portrait of the young Selina. With her “misleadingly delicate face, the skull small and exquisitely formed,” Selina does seem to possess an aura:

The cheek bones rather high—or perhaps they looked so because of the fact that the eyes, dark, soft, and luminous, were unusually deep-set in their sockets. The
face, instead of narrowing to a soft curve at the chin, developed unexpected strength in the jaw-line. That line, fine, steel-strong, sharp and clear, was the stuff of which pioneer women are made…Perhaps it was this velvety softness of the eyes that caused one to overlook the firmness of the lower face. (21)

Hard times and hard work ruin Selina’s youthful beauty. Indeed, “[w]hen the next ten years had done their worst to her” and she encounters a friend from childhood, the old friend begins to sob, crying over the fate of this “tanned, weather-beaten, toil-worn woman…a woman with bad teeth, flat breasts, a sagging pocket in her capacious skirt…” (21). Yet the physically ruined woman still possesses a magnificent, halo-like glow:

Her face looked young, eager, fresh…It came into her face, that look, when she was happy, exhilarated, excited. That was why those who loved her and brought that look into her face thought her beautiful, while those who did not love her never saw the look and consequently considered her a plain woman. (193-194)

Ferber illustrates Selina’s maturation by depicting her acceptance of life with all its difficulties and her openness and willingness to change. She resists her son’s complacent conformity and urges him to be open to new experiences and different kinds of people. As she herself recognizes, this willingness to experiment with new ideas means she is able to turn her small farm into a much greater success than her loving but unimaginative late husband could have done.

Ferber does not write explicit sex scenes, but sexual attraction does have an important place in her novels. The virginal Selina is anxious on her wedding night as she listens to Pervus’s “[h]eavy quick footsteps across the bare kitchen floor. This man
was coming into her room” (98). In *Show Boat*, Gaylord and Magnolia are drawn to each other by deep romantic love and sexual desire, but once they move to Chicago, “[h]e was not true to her. She knew this now. He knew she knew this” (250). Ferber also plays with another interesting aspect of virginal innocence in her portraits of women she describes as “married spinsters.” The reader has met this type of woman before; she is Balzac’s Cousin Bette, Dickens’ Miss Havisham, and Lennon and McCartney’s Eleanor Rigby. In those representations, however, the unmarried woman is either embittered and spiteful or passive and pitiable. Ferber’s “married spinsters,” on the other hand, are more nuanced. At first reading, *Show Boat’s* Parthy Hawks and Emma Louise Glasgow in *Come and Get It* are prissy, repressed women, stereotypical old maids who have miraculously found a man willing to marry them. But Parthy and Emma Louise are more complicated than that and Ferber makes it clear that both are deeply sexually attracted to their husbands.

For example, the initial description of the “wattled and ocherous” Emma Louise Glasgow (9) is cruel. Emma Louise is portrayed as a woman “utterly lacking coquetry” (9) who, “[a]fter more than a quarter of a century of marriage with a romantic...[had] emerged triumphant in the character for which thwarted fate had intended her—that of a congenital old maid” (10). Nevertheless, Ferber is quick to point out that Emma Louise married for love and remains “[t]erribly in love with him to this day” (13). The description of the luncheon at which Barney and Emma Louise meet underscores her immediate sexual response to the man who will become her husband. Barney’s boss brings his young employee home to his “fine brick mansion on the Butte” to join his family at their mid-day meal, “and there he had met Hannah Hewitt and the tall, spare, spinsterish
Emma Louise.” Mother and daughter are immediately aware of Barney’s virility: "The two women had stared at him. He was a figure to store the emotions. Then they had turned and looked at each other, exchanging a wordless message” (110).

Ferber also makes it clear that Barney and Emma Louise enjoy an active sex life together and that “this man, her husband, after twenty-five years of marriage, still was to her the Great Untouchable. To this wedded spinster, inhibited, inarticulate, he was romance, he was mystery, he was power, god, Man” (329). When Emma Louise complains that their pregnant daughter “feels miserable and looks a sight. Land sakes, when I was carrying…I was lively as a cricket,” Barney replies:

“That's because you had me to make love to you and she has Orvie.”

“Don’t be common, Mr. Glasgow.”

“Love isn't common, Emma Louise. It’s damn rare.” (284)

Ferber’s draws equally nuanced portraits of her leading men. Yancey Cravat is the most fully realized among them. He is at once sexy, adventurous, principled, unprejudiced, financially naive, and thoroughly irresponsible. Nor is he alone among Ferber’s heroes in this combination of qualities; when Eliza McGraw writes about Yancey’s “heterogeneous, complex identity” (65), she might also be describing Gaylord Ravenal and Barney Glasgow. Ferber’s men have many faults, but there is much to admire about them. They are intensely masculine, which in Ferber’s view makes them bold and very sexy. Her description of Yancey is illustrative: “No room seemed big enough for his [Yancey’s] giant frame; no chair but dwindled beneath the breadth of his shoulders (Cimarron 9). Gaylord has “about him an air of distinction, an atmosphere of richness” (Show Boat 131). In light of this hyper-masculinity, it is somewhat surprising
that they often also possess what are commonly considered “feminine” qualities that hint at a more sensitive side to their personalities. Gaylord is “rather gentle, and more than a little weak” (139). As for Yancey:

It was with a shock of astonishment that you remarked about him certain things totally at variance with his bulk, his virility, his appearance of enormous power. His mouth, full and sensual, had still an expression of great sweetness. His eyelashes were long and curling, like a beautiful girl’s...His step was amazingly light and graceful for a man of his powerful frame...his feet were small and arched like a woman’s...His hands, too, were disproportionate to a man of his stature; slim, pliant, white. (9-10)

Pervus deJong and Barney Glasgow are decent, hard-working men, albeit unimaginative and not open to new ideas. Gaylord Ravenal, on the other hand, is a bold, risk-taking gambler; when necessity demands that he leave New Orleans on short notice, he quickly emerges as a confident—and reasonably convincing—actor. Selina’s father, Simeon Peake, is a minor figure in So Big and, in a nice metatextual move on Ferber’s part, also makes a brief appearance in Show Boat, when there is a brief reference to the unique circumstances of his death. Like Gaylord, he is a gambler, and urges his daughter to accept life in all its variety, “to realize that this whole thing is just a grand adventure. A fine show. The trick is to play in it and look at it at the same time. The more kinds of people you see, and the more things you do, and the more things that happen to you, the richer you are” (So Big i15-16).

Ferber did not marry and is not known to have had any romantic attachments. This has led to rumors about the possibility of a latent lesbianism, but Julie Goldsmith
Gilbert, her grand-niece and biographer, probably comes closer to the truth when she describes Ferber’s friendship with the Jed Harris, a “producer, on occasion a director, and on every occasion a heartbreaker” (Gilbert 332). Although no one knows the exact nature of their relationship, Gilbert’s suggestion that Harris was Ferber’s grand passion is persuasive, particularly in light of a photograph that appears her biography of her aunt. The photo of Harris shows a handsome, arrogant, dark-completed man wearing a business suit and a fedora tipped at a rakish angle. (Plate 9) He is sitting, relaxed and confident, in the front rows of a theatre, gesturing at someone or something just outside the frame of the photograph. Like Yancey, he seems to be focused on his next adventure. Of his appearance, Gilbert writes:

It was a face to cause maximum vulnerability in others. An amazing face—like Pan dressed in Mafia clothes, like Peck’s Bad Boy gone worse. The eyes were like acupuncture needles tipped in velvet; the mouth a lemon twist. Malevolent merriment, promises of emotional calisthenics, more demand than supply—all working in his expression. Not a step-right-up face. A lie-right-down face. Irresistible. (334).

This could equally be a description of the dashing and dark-completed Gaylord Ravanel, Yancey Cravat, or the young Barney Glasgow. It is also reminiscent of the muscular laborers in “Deep South” and “Steel” mural panels in Benton’s American Today mural cycle. Ferber wrote novels about bad boys for good girls. In the same way as her heroines, she seems to have found the type irresistible.
“To Swell a Progress, Start a Scene of Two”

Because Benton and Ferber paint portraits of strong people set against equally strong landscapes, we might assume that their minor characters—their figure drawings, so to speak—play less significant roles in the stories they tell and the messages they are trying to communicate. Yet memorable characters often step out of the background to illuminate aspects of the American character that the protagonists cannot express. The number and variety of everyday people at work and play in Benton’s murals draws attention to the complexity and diversity of the country and remind the viewer that this is a people’s history of the United States, not a traditional narrative about great men performing great deeds. In the “Parks, the Circus, the Klan, the Press” panel from his 1933 mural, A Social History of the State of Indiana, for example, the artist incorporates a series of vignettes featuring everyday people at work (Plate 8). A white nurse cares for a small black child, firefighters rush toward a burning building, a reporter writes an article at a typewriter, a leading Indiana conservationist plants a tree—and members of the Ku Klux Klan carry a burning torch toward an innocent, vulnerable target. The panel vividly underscores the positive and caring behaviors that bring Americans together, as well as the dangers of the hatred and prejudice that divide them.

Ferber’s minor characters also frequently serve to underscore the larger points she is making. In Come and Get It, Swen Bostrom speaks for the environmental protectionists who cry out against the Glasgows’ ruthless exploitation of the forests. In Cimarron, Ruby Big Elk is a reminder that proud, independent Native Americans lived in the Oklahoma territory long before the arrival of the white settlers and that their rich culture should not be marginalized. In the same novel, The Kid and Dixie Lee
demonstrate that even outlaws and “fallen women” can be complex, and often
compassionate, characters. These men and women are proud of their ethnic and social
origins and resist fully assimilating into what Ferber is critiquing as the culturally
sterile world around them.

Sol Levy, the European Jewish peddler who becomes a successful retail
merchant in the frontier world of *Cimarron*, stands out as the most vivid among Ferber’s
literary “figure drawings.” Sol is a quiet, thoughtful man who makes great contributions
to his new town, but remains the target of subtle and overt anti-Semitism. In spite of his
business acumen and philanthropy, he remains an outsider and never becomes a full
member of the community. He is the eternal outsider, the archetypal wandering Jew.
Indeed, although he appears only in one novel, Sol might have wandered from one of
Ferber’s regional novels to another, providing a moral force in each narrative. Most of
Ferber’s minor characters, however, are organically tied to the regions in which they
live. The Dutch farmers of rural Illinois in *So Big* are as distinct from the members of the
native tribes of Oklahoma as they are from Queenie and Jo, the black workers on the
Cotton Blossom in *Show Boat* and the lumberjacks of northern Wisconsin in *Come and
Get It*. These men and women are subordinate to the action, but critical to the sense of
place that Ferber brings alive throughout her regional texts and through them, she
incorporates subplots and subtexts that her protagonists could not otherwise undertake
or sustain.

The worlds that Benton and Ferber portray are much the same; indeed, some of
Ferber’s minor characters might have stepped directly out of Benton’s murals. The man
Barney Glasgow’s daughter loves (not the man she marries) is a twin to the muscular industrial worker in Benton’s “Steel.” The night before her society wedding to “plump, red-cheeked, unexciting, and two inches shorter than she” Orville Bremmer (19), Evvy Glasgow confesses to her father about her true love:

He works Third Hand on the Machine…He’s been in the mill since he was fourteen…He’s tall and thin and when he’s taking the paper over the Machine he looks like one of those Greek gods we had in Ancient History…He has on pants and a white undershirt and his stomach is so flat. (Come and Get It 214)

Benton might also have painted the scene in which the widowed Selina deJong and her young son bring their crops to the Chicago wholesale market for the first time: “On the street corners where the lights were brightest there were stands at which men sold chocolate, cigars, collar buttons, suspenders, shoe strings, patent contrivances. It was like a fair…Here was a crap game beneath the street light. There stood two girls laughing and chatting with a policeman” (So Big 140).

These minor characters and figure drawings—Benton’s steelworkers and farm laborers, and Ferber’s pioneers, loggers, farmers, and performers—serve a purpose beyond furthering plot and situation. The dynamic tensions that emerge from their relationships and interactions underscore the strengths and weaknesses of the United States as a whole. Benton’s murals and Ferber’s narratives are not intended as pretty pictures or anecdotal stories designed for audience amusement and entertainment. Both artist and author have a larger agenda: they are working to create a type of “usable past” that tells the story of America. This past is not only the history of the
events that brought the country to the early decades of the twentieth century, but one
that provides a warning about its future direction. The world Benton and Ferber portray
includes men and women of honor and courage, but it also includes violence, racism,
political corruption, and an uncontrolled individualism that celebrates money and
materialism over the common good. Both the artist and the author are warning about
the consequences that can result if the nation’s growth in those directions continues
unchecked.

In the decades to come, regional writing and historical muralism lost their
positions as popular and influential genres. The realistic regionalism of the 1920s and
1930s in both art and literature was replaced by the aesthetic and philosophical turn that
that increasingly focused on a sense of social and cultural anomie and led the viewer
and the reader into a world where individualism is celebrated over communal values. At
the same time, American regionalism fell victim to the standardization of culture, as
motion pictures and television networks spoke to broad national audiences. Individual
regional differences continued to exist, of course, but were often presented only to be
mocked, as in the “Beverly Hillbillies,” or idealized, as in the motion-picture and
television Westerns of the 1950s. Nevertheless, the genius loci, the spirit of place,
endures. Beckett’s tramps aside, most authors and artists still situate their characters in
a specific, recognizable place. As globalization continues to standardize much of the
world, the nuances of locality are likely to become even more important.

As Americans deal with the complex issues of our generation, it is easy to look
back on earlier eras in our national history with nostalgia and think of them as idealistic
eras of peace and harmony. Benton and Ferber’s vivid representations of regional
America during the late-nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth centuries remind us that this attitude is misleading and that their commentary on the country’s usable past can serve to inform the present. Their story-telling murals and mural-like stories celebrate the generosity and expansiveness of the American personality, while at the same time warning about critical flaws in the national character. Although they do not provide approaches to resolving the problems they identify, they remind us of the value in the diversity of America’s regions and its peoples and that the United States has survived even the worst of times and that there is always the hope that a better future lies ahead.
Plate 1: T.H. Benton, *A Social History of the State of Missouri*
Plate 2: T.H. Benton, *The Grapes of Wrath: The Departure of the Joads*
Plate 3: T.H. Benton, *Trail Riders*
Plate 4: T.H. Benton, *Weighing Cotton*
Plate 5: T.H. Benton, America Today/Deep South
Plate 6: T.H. Benton, *America Today/Steel*
Plate 7: W.H.D. Koerner, Madonna of the Prairie
Plate 8: T.H. Benton, *Parks, the Circus, the Klan, the Press*
Plate 9: Jed Harris: Wolf of Broadway
AFTERWORD

My interest in the fiction of Edna Ferber and Fannie Hurst stems from a deep sense of personal identification. Each of us is the daughter of Jewish parents born and raised in the United States. As a result, we had no direct experience of the pogroms or death camps that defined too much of the twentieth-century European Jewish experience. We were raised and educated to have pride in the United States as a model among the nations, to cherish liberal values, and to believe in the equality of all people. In addition, each of us was an ambitious young woman who knew from an early age that she wanted to be a writer.

When I returned to the academy during the era of identity studies, I assumed my work on would focus on Ferber and Hurst as Jewish women, but as I became increasingly engaged with their narratives I realized I was drawn to them as unhyphenated American authors who occasionally highlighted their personal gender and ethnic identities but were as often concerned with issues affecting the country as a whole. I thus joined a different conversation, one that acknowledges their Jewish backgrounds and their experiences as independent professional women, but that places particular emphasis their concern with the totality of the American experience.

Throughout this study, I have sought to demonstrate the ways in which Ferber and Hurst discuss some of the most significant issues facing America and Americans during the period between 1915 and 1935. In addition to their narratives about the status of women and the experiences of Jews in the United States, these include issues
of economic insecurity, health care disparities, immigration and assimilation, and racism. All are social problems and concerns that we continue to deal with today. In addition, both women consider a variety of aesthetic issues, including the influence of modernism on contemporary fiction and theater and the influence of the visual arts on written texts. Their attitudes toward these issues are expressed in both their plots and the literary styles through which they tell their stories.

Ferber and Hurst were born in the mid-1880s and died less than two months apart in 1968. Their careers began during the early decades of the twentieth century and continued into the 1960s. During the 1950s, Ferber published two bestselling novels, *Giant* (1952) and *Ice Palace* (1958); although Hurst’s reputation peaked in the 1930s, her novels remained popular throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Nevertheless, by the time they died, both authors’ reputations had begun a long decline. Not only are they the subjects of relatively little current scholarship, but it is not unusual to discover today that the type of general reader (who once made up their enthusiastic audiences) has never heard of them.

Literary reputations rise and fall for many reasons. We might, for example, argue that the United States has moved on from the America they write about. In particular, some of the ways in which they represent race are no longer appropriate. Although both Ferber and Hurst were outspoken liberals, some of the attitudes that emerge in their fiction are unacceptable by present-day standards. For example, Ferber’s pointed critique of excessive home-front patriotism during World War I in the 1918 short story “One Hundred Per Cent” is undercut by the gratuitous racist description of a “wrinkled, kindly, ape-like” African American sleeping-car porter (69). Hurst’s *Imitation of Life* was
well-received by white readers, but African American leaders at the time of publication quickly criticized the author for her portrayals of black women as either the stereotypical “black mammy” and “tragic mulatta” rather than as complicated, three-dimensional human beings. Today’s reader will undoubtedly approach these texts with ambiguous feelings—but must also, with sorrow, recognize that the call for racial genocide articulated by Lewis Venable in *Show Boat* has been repeatedly reiterated—and, even more horrifyingly, actualized—in our own time.

Twenty-first century readers may also criticize Ferber and Hurst for their seeming acceptance of the *status quo* as it relates to woman’s place in American society. This is not to suggest that they are in any way anti-feminist; their female characters reflect the struggles, frustrations, achievements, and disappointments of the independent working woman. However, both authors recognize that true gender equality will be slow in coming and do not argue for resistance to their era’s attitudes toward the place of women in society. Instead, they provide examples of how to survive within a masculine power structure.

Significantly, their women are not perfect. Ferber’s Emma McChesney is a successful traveling saleswoman who “makes it” in a man’s world, but loses sight of her husband’s and son’s idealistic desire to serve their country during World War I. In *Cimarron*, Ferber portrays Sabra Cravat as a talented and principled newspaper editor and elected official who must learn to overcome her prejudice against Native Americans and other minorities. In Hurst’s *Imitation of Life*, Bea Pullman builds a successful restaurant empire, but sacrifices romantic love and sexual satisfaction in her quest to provide for herself and her daughter.
The rise of modernism and the accompanying critical disdain for realistic narrative also worked to undermine Ferber’s and Hurst’s reputations. With the exception of *Lummox*, both authors remained loyal to the realistic style. Gertrude Stein might dismiss “plot and grammar as contrivances rather than natural components of literature” (Italie, *Boston Globe* B7), but Ferber and Hurst continued to write in the straightforward and direct style that is most frequently associated with middlebrow literature. Situated awkwardly between the intellectualism of so-called highbrow literature and the earthiness of the lowbrow, the middlebrow has long been considered a literary stepchild by literary scholars and critics. Its reputation remains scarred by the vitriolic attacks of critics such as Virginia Woolf, Q.D. Leavis, and Dwight Macdonald. Woolf in particular is so central to the twentieth-century literary canon that her opinion first articulated in 1923 still dominates the conversation. Famously asserting her position as a highbrow—a “man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in pursuit of an idea,” but who is “wholly incapable of dealing successfully with what is called real life” (1-2)—Woolf praises authors such as Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Gustave Flaubert, Thomas Hardy, and Henry James, whom she feels lead the life of the mind. She also praises lowbrow authors, who she claims, dwell entirely in the body, and describes as “a man or a woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life.” She scorns the middlebrow, the “man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige” (3).
Middlebrow literature does have some influential contemporary champions. These include Gordon Hutner, who defends “these bourgeois novels” from the “critical bias against middle-class readers and their so-called middlebrow taste.” Middlebrow literature, he argues, is what “Americans chose for their edification and literary edification” and “perform[s] the cultural work of helping to shape the public sphere in modern America” (2). Joan Shelley Rubin and Franco Moretti are also among the small group of scholars who recognize the importance of middlebrow culture as an important way to create an informed and engaged American public. However, although the academy now recognizes the importance of writers from many historically-neglected backgrounds, it is still too often reluctant to acknowledge the contributions of middlebrow writers. This is a curious omission, because there is much to be gained from understanding the influence of middlebrow literature on its broad readership. Ferber and Hurst, for example, include a broad diversity of characters in their fiction, enabling readers whose personal social circles were limited to encounter a range of people who may have seemed superficially unlike them, but who suffer similar economic and personal challenges.

As I have tried to demonstrate throughout this study, the more we consider Ferber’s and Hurst’s early fiction, the more we recognize that these narratives have considerable contemporary relevance. Indeed, their work has greater relevance to the America of 2018 than to the America of the 1960s, the decade in which they died. Post-WWII America was a society of public optimism and hidden private challenges. The voices of Americans whose lives belied this self-absorbed optimism were too often unheard and unheeded. Ferber and Hurst gave voice to these neglected Americans. As
a result, they too often reminded readers in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s of the people Americans wanted to forget. A public that believes it has conquered war and would now conquer disease, economic disparities, and racism, does not want to read about the desperation of middle-aged domestic workers struggling afford food and shelter or about abandoned wives literally forced to sing for their supper.

During the early decades of the twenty-first century, on the other hand, it has become all too obvious that many middle-class Americans have fallen off the ladder of success. Today, the struggles of many of Ferber’s and Hurst’s characters no longer seem quaint or outdated. The rising generation of young Americans has many things in common with these men and women of an earlier, less affluent, era. This is particularly true of the children of lower-middle- and working-class families who are not graduates of elite colleges or cannot fall back on the “bank of mom and dad.” Unlike many members of the generations immediately preceding them, these young people are often not searching for a career that fulfills their “passion,” but simply looking for a job that will enable them to support themselves, buy homes of their own, educate their children, and save for old age. Their Baby Boomer parents—secure with Social Security and Medicare and private and public pensions—may not understand the struggles of a Selina Peake deJong, the city-girl-turned-farmer in Ferber’s So Big, or the floorwalkers and salesgirls who work in Hurst’s department stores, but the younger generation can more immediately identify with them.

A scan of the daily headlines demonstrates that the twenty-first century is shaping up to be dramatically different from the last. The men and women who populate Ferber’s and Hurst’s narratives and the personal and societal issues they confront are
no longer as outdated as they may have seemed only a few years ago. They remind present-day readers that they are not alone, that others have confronted and overcome similar difficulties, and that it is possible to develop a rich, meaningful interior life in spite of external difficulties. Because Ferber and Hurst deliver these messages in ways that are nonjudgmental and entertaining, they provide guidance and encouragement to Americans of this generation. They had much to say in their time, as evidenced by the many novels, short stories, plays, essays, and memoirs that were eagerly received by their enthusiastic readers. Contemporary readers who rediscover them will find that they have much to say to the current generation as well. Edna Ferber and Fannie Hurst are still speaking to us and there is much to learn from them.
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